

A troubled year: Life satisfaction during the pandemic

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POLICY BRIEFING

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Previous studies have found that mental well-being in the UK declined during the coronavirus pandemic. Few studies, however, have examined which aspects of life satisfaction varied for different population groups during different waves of the pandemic. This policy briefing describes the findings of a study comparing bi-monthly life satisfaction data collected in May 2020 – March 2021 with the same months in 2018-19. The findings show that life satisfaction was consistently lower in 2020-21, and by March 2021 it still had not returned to pre-pandemic levels, with the most disadvantaged people being the least happy. This group already had lower levels of life satisfaction pre-pandemic, but the pandemic has widened the gap. It is vital for policymakers to recognise this disparity to ensure the most vulnerable are not left behind as society reopens.

Key Points:

- *Throughout the pandemic year, life satisfaction was lower than in the year before, but it fluctuated according to the different pandemic waves. January 2021, during the third national lockdown, was a particularly difficult month.*
- *Both men and women experienced a decline in life satisfaction, but in January 2021 women seemed to suffer more.*
- *All educational groups experienced a decline in satisfaction during the pandemic. Graduates, however, continued to have higher life satisfaction than non-graduates, particularly at the start of the pandemic. By January 2021 life satisfaction was at its lowest for all educational groups.*
- *Those living with a partner during the pandemic had higher life satisfaction than those who were unpartnered before and during the pandemic.*
- *Although employed people reported a decline in life satisfaction during lockdown, they were still happier than those not working before and during the lockdown. And while furloughed people experienced a decline, the furlough scheme may have protected them from experiencing the lowest level of life satisfaction suffered by those not working.*

Introduction

Studies have shown that the Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected people’s lives, with profound effects on mental well-being. However, people often adapt to difficulties and experience a rebound after a traumatic event. For example, a UK study by Daly and Robinson found that psychological distress had returned to pre-pandemic levels by July 2020. However, few studies have traced life satisfaction month-to-month throughout the entire year and across different pandemic waves and lockdowns, and compared them to the seasonal pattern observed pre-pandemic.

In this study, we compared bi-monthly life satisfaction from May 2020 – March 2021 with levels during the same month in the year before. By comparing like-for-like, as far as possible we were able to determine whether declines in life satisfaction were due to seasonal variation or the exogenous impact of the pandemic. We also examined demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of individuals to see how life satisfaction converged or diverged across the year, contributing to widening or closing socioeconomic gaps in well-being.

The study

To examine change in life satisfaction we used the UK longitudinal household survey (UKHLS), a nationally representative survey, and its associated Covid-19 surveys. Wave 10 of the main survey was conducted between 2018 and 2019 and was used to construct the baseline trend. Each month of the wave 10 survey has responses from between 2,500-2,800 individuals. Individuals were asked “how satisfied are you currently with your life overall?” measured on a 7 point scale. The same life satisfaction question was asked in May 2020 as part of the Covid-19 survey and then every other month until March 2021. The Covid-19 surveys include between 11,000-14,000 respondents. Middle-aged people in stable households were more likely to respond to these surveys, and while cross-sectional weights have been applied, the surveys may not have captured low-income, disadvantaged individuals. Nonetheless, this bias means that our study likely overestimates the overall level of life satisfaction, and the gap between 2018-19 and 2020-21 is even larger than our findings suggest.

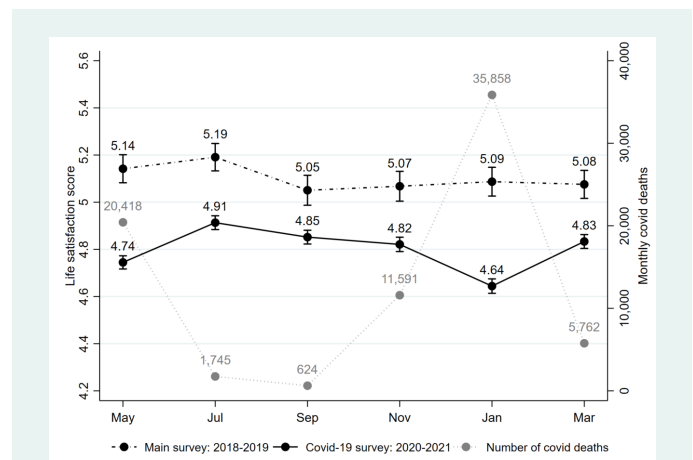
Main findings

Life satisfaction during the pandemic was lower than the year before

Average life satisfaction was consistently lower during 2020-2021 compared to 2018-2019. In a normal year, life satisfaction is not that much lower in the winter months. The fluctuations in the pandemic year, therefore, are remarkable, mirroring the waves of the pandemic.

In May 2020, two months after the initial March 2020 lockdown, life satisfaction was 0.4 points lower than it was in May of the previous year. It rose with the easing of lockdowns but still did not rebound to pre-pandemic levels. By November, life satisfaction declined again. In January 2021, during the strictest lockdown period when Covid-19 deaths were at their highest, life satisfaction was at its lowest.

By March 2021, when the end of lockdown was in sight, average life satisfaction rose again, but it still did not achieve pre-pandemic levels. Unfortunately, the UKHLS Covid-19 survey has ended and we will not be able to see whether life satisfaction has recuperated until the next UKHLS survey has been conducted.



Source: Data on number of deaths, Office for National Statistics; Data on life satisfaction, UKHLS.

Note: The y-axis on the left-hand side indicates life satisfaction on a scale 1-7, and the right-hand side axis indicates the number of monthly deaths in the UK due to Covid-19. Samples are adults aged 16 and over in UKHLS.

Figure 1: Life satisfaction before and during the pandemic and monthly UK deaths

Men and women have a similar level of life satisfaction, except in January 2021 when women's life satisfaction was lower than men's

In general, men and women report similar levels of life satisfaction. During the pandemic, both experienced a significant decline throughout the year (Figure 2).

Only in January 2021 were gender differences significant, when the drop in life satisfaction for women was 3.5 times greater than for men.

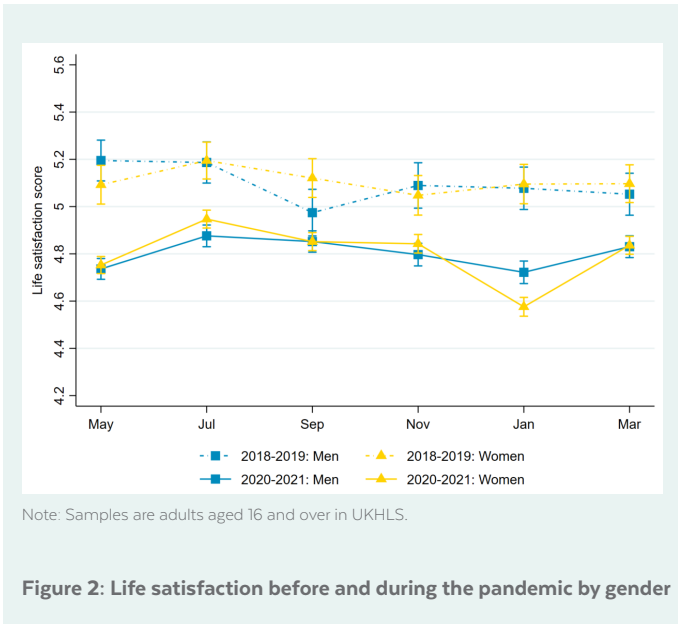


Figure 2: Life satisfaction before and during the pandemic by gender

Life satisfaction is usually higher among the higher educated, but during the pandemic all educational groups became less satisfied

Before the pandemic, people with a university degree generally reported comparatively higher life satisfaction, followed by those with A-level and GCSE qualifications.

During lockdown, all educational levels experienced lower life satisfaction. Those with the highest education had, on average, life satisfaction scores that were lower than the lowest levels pre-pandemic.

However, in January 2021 the highest educated experienced a greater drop than the lowest educated, resulting in little difference in life satisfaction across education levels. By March 2021, however, we started to see differentials widening again.

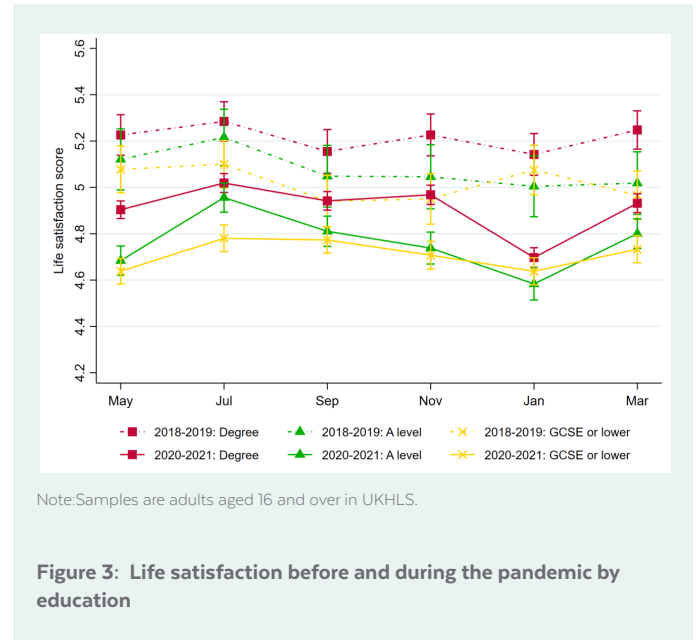


Figure 3: Life satisfaction before and during the pandemic by education

Although experiencing a decrease, the level of life satisfaction for people living with a partner during the pandemic is higher than the level for unpartnered before and during the pandemic

People living with a partner had much higher life satisfaction than those unpartnered before and during the lockdown. Both the partnered and unpartnered experienced a decline in life satisfaction due to the pandemic. However, by March 2021, life satisfaction for people living with a partner recuperated to the pre-pandemic level, while this did not happen for the unpartnered.

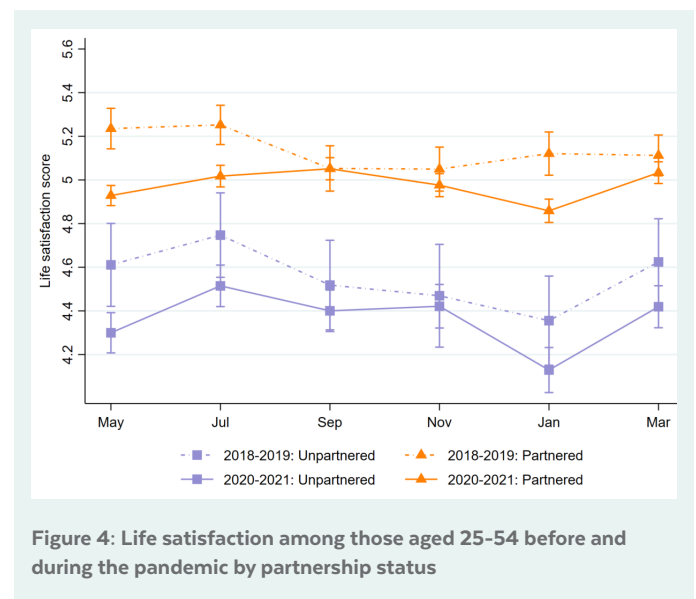


Figure 4: Life satisfaction among those aged 25-54 before and during the pandemic by partnership status

While furloughed people experienced a decline, the furlough scheme did seem to protect them from experiencing the lowest level of life satisfaction suffered by those not working

In line with previous research, employed people consistently have higher life satisfaction than non-working people. During the lockdown, the UK government implemented Employment Schemes which paid a minimum of 80% salary to those whose jobs or businesses were affected severely by the pandemic. Although people furloughed had lower life satisfaction than those not furloughed, the level was still higher than people who were not working.

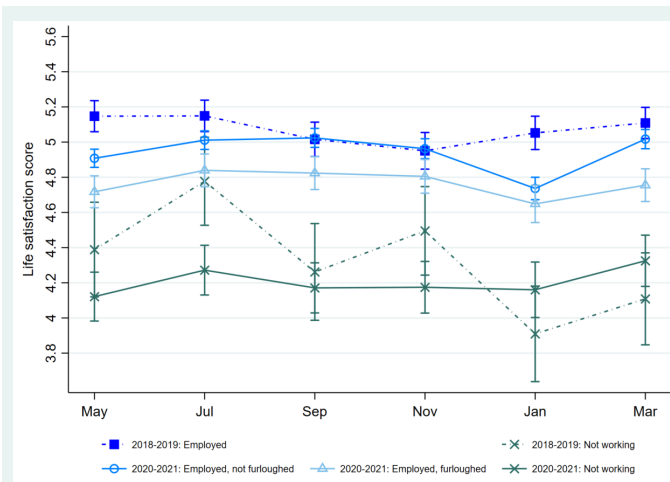


Figure 5: Life satisfaction among those aged 25-54 before and during the pandemic by employment status

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, 2020-21, the year of the Covid-19 pandemic, was a troubled year for many people. Those who are usually the least happy – the lowest-educated, unpartnered, and people out of work – experienced the lowest life satisfaction during the pandemic. However, the more advantaged also became less happy.

In January 2021, when deaths were increasing rapidly and the UK was in a strict lockdown, even those who were normally satisfied with their lives became less satisfied. Gender differentials also widened in this period. By March 2021, life satisfaction had still not completely recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

Policy implications

This study highlights the subjective well-being implications of the pandemic and lockdowns on society. During the crisis, characteristics such as having a co-residential partner, being employed and having a higher level of education may offer protective effects on life satisfaction, widening socioeconomic differentials.

The most disadvantaged already had lower levels of life satisfaction pre-pandemic, but the pandemic widened these differences. They usually have fewer fallback options and resources to draw upon.

It is vital policymakers recognise these challenges to ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind as society reopens.

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