

# What is wellbeing policy?

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## Introduction

What is *wellbeing*? What is *quality of life* (QoL)? Canada's federal Quality of Life Framework, and numerous policy initiatives internationally, talk about wellbeing and quality of life as though there is something new and specific which could guide policy. Are they talking about the same thing? Is this more than rhetorical branding?

## Wellbeing policy

Public policies aim to achieve specific goals, such as reducing traffic accidents, raising low family incomes, or increasing the number of trained nurses. These policies represent choices on how a society allocates resources to address important issues.

“Wellbeing policy” (or “wellbeing budgeting”) focuses on improving overall quality of human experience in a similarly grounded, evidence-driven sense. So far, formal implementations of frameworks for wellbeing policy rely on self-reported (subjective) wellbeing as the overarching indicator or ultimate empirical guide to the quality of life experience (Layard, 2006; Frijters, Clark, et al., 2020; UK Treasury, 2021).

## What wellbeing is

The use of the term *wellbeing* has likely come into its recent prominence in policy circles as a result of progress in the economics of happiness, which uses large datasets incorporating self-reported life satisfaction to deduce what circumstances and choices lead to happy individuals, communities, workplaces, and societies.

Appealing to people's reported life satisfaction makes sure that our ideas about what is good for humans are accountable to empirical experience.

Sometimes, the terms *wellbeing* and *quality of life* are used to refer to a collection of measurable *determinants* of high life evaluation, alongside the evaluations themselves. Such an approach can deviate from empirical accountability if experts or advocates impose their own beliefs about what are important determinants.

But if the objective measures of the social, economic, environmental, and institutional factors (e.g., health, social connection, safety, income security, land and spiritual connection, and environmental quality) that shape our lived experience are treated as empirically testable determinants, then including them gives us a valuable **dual definition**. It combines subjective evaluation (how people feel about their lives) with the observable determinants of those evaluations. In practice, life satisfaction provides

a unifying metric, while domain-specific indicators help diagnose what is driving it and **where policy can act**.

Wellbeing is therefore not a vague or purely normative concept. It is **empirically measurable**, **policy-relevant**, and **comparable across populations**, enabling governments to assess trade-offs and prioritize interventions based on their impact on people's lives.

## What wellbeing is not

Wellbeing and quality of life must be distinguished from adjacent policy frameworks that use similar language but differ in purpose and method. It is:

**Not a relabeling of “social determinants of health” frameworks:** While there is overlap in determinants (e.g., income, housing, education), wellbeing policy is not anchored in health outcomes or sector-specific mandates. Its distinguishing feature is the use of a **common outcome metric** (such as life satisfaction) to quantify and compare the marginal impact of policies across domains, rather than treating domains as intrinsically or normatively prioritized. Moreover, the importance of a given determinant for preventing morbidity is not the same as its importance for promoting people's cognitive evaluations of their lives, overall.

**Not a dimension of health, nor of mental illness:** Wellbeing is not intrinsically focused on prevention, nor is it measured by suffering; its roots are in positive psychology. Wellbeing policy does not feature an intrinsic focus on disadvantaged groups nor on the ill. Instead, appropriate emphasis arises naturally in policy based on the efficacy of interventions in improving lives. From the point of view of life satisfaction cost-benefit frameworks, the only reason health matters is the degree to which it improves mental experience, accounted in wellbeing-years (Frijters and Krekel, 2021).

**Not a values-first “wellbeing economy” agenda:** Wellbeing policy does not begin from an agenda of predefined mechanisms, such as righting specific wrongs, advocating for worker ownership, rhetorically blaming capitalism, or other normative objectives, nor can it begin from vague rhetoric around healthy ecosystems. Specific economic and social policies may emerge as priorities where they demonstrably improve people's lives, but they are evaluated **instrumentally**, based on their empirically estimated effects on wellbeing, rather than asserted as ends in themselves. Where evidence on wellbeing cannot in principle guide policy, other conceptual rationale are necessary.

**Not reducible to happiness in a narrow sense:** Wellbeing is not simply momentary pleasure or positive affect; it reflects a broader evaluation of life as a whole.

**Not paternalistic preference-setting:** The aim is not for governments to define the “good life,” but to use population-level evidence to identify the conditions under which people tend to report better lives.

**Not a sufficient measure for sustainability:** Using evidence on the determinants of wellbeing is a wholly insufficient approach to managing risks of long-run or complex threats to ecological (or other) sustainability. Cost-benefit tradeoffs for long-run, complex outcomes cannot be calculated with the same precision as investments and policies with payoffs in the near future or to the current

generation. Therefore, another rationale is needed to address sustainability policy (Barrington-Leigh, 2021).

In short, wellbeing is best understood as an **outcome space** — how people's lives go — operationalized through measurement and causal inference, rather than a branding of existing sectoral frameworks or a vehicle for advancing predetermined policy goals.

## Conceptual foundations

In the economics of happiness, *wellbeing* is typically defined as individuals' self-reported life satisfaction — a global assessment of one's life as a whole. These assessments are carried out using a single survey question, usually a close variation of the OECD (2025) guideline: “**Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days, on a scale from 0 to 10?**” Decades of empirical work show that these measures are:

- **Informative:** They capture aspects of welfare not reflected in income or consumption (e.g., mental health, social relationships, security).
- **Comparable:** Responses are sufficiently stable and comparable across groups to support policy inference.
- **Policy-relevant:** They respond predictably to changes, e.g., in employment, health, environment, governance, and inequality.

Intervention experiments, natural experiments, and statistical inference about differences and changes in life conditions comprise the evidence base of the economics of happiness. This evidence informs systems of cost/benefit (or “cost/wellbeing”) analysis that quantitatively predict return on investment for different policies — i.e., how wellbeing will change, and for whom, across the population.

This measurement and evaluation approach is used across countries and cultures around the world, and accommodates cultural variation in the determinants of wellbeing. For instance, measures of social connection appear to be universally strong predictors of life satisfaction around the world, while connection to land and ecology and more generally measures of cultural continuity loom larger in some cultures, notably many Indigenous populations.

From the economist's point of view, **collective wellbeing** is nothing more than the distribution (or collection) of individuals' wellbeing, since only individuals experience life. This is true even though many of the determinants of individual wellbeing are collective circumstances and community attributes.

## The Canadian approach

“Wellbeing policy” refers to a systematic approach to public decision-making that evaluates success not only by economic outcomes, but by how people’s lives are actually going. In Canada, this approach is operationalized through the federal Quality of Life (QoL) Framework (Sanmartin et al., 2021), which integrates evidence on subjective wellbeing — including life satisfaction — with a broader dashboard of social, economic, environmental, and institutional indicators. Canada’s QoL Framework reflects a **hybrid model**:



1. **A unifying outcome:** Life satisfaction serves as a central, or overarching, indicator, along with sense of meaning and purpose, and future outlook. This “umbrella measure”, provides an empirical anchor for assessing whether policies improve people’s lived experience or, more proximally, allows the factors contributing to, or detracting from, well-being to be identified (Sanmartin et al., 2021).
2. **A multidimensional dashboard:** Indicators are grouped into five domains (prosperity, health, environment, society, good governance). These indicators are “evergreen”, in that they may evolve as evidence about what matters evolves. They provide a bridge between objective policy outcomes and the summary indicator, and they align with both capabilities- and determinants-based perspectives.
3. **Distribution and sustainability:** The framework leaves the complex questions of distribution and of sustainability out of the discrete set of indicators, since these rightly belong as cross-cutting lenses.
4. **Integration into policy processes:** Departments are expected to assess how proposals affect QoL indicators. Budgeting and reporting increasingly reference these metrics.

Two starting points for information about the federal framework are available from [the Treasury Board Secretariat](#) and at the [Statistics Canada’s Quality of Life Hub](#).

## What makes a policy a “wellbeing policy”?

A policy qualifies as “wellbeing-oriented” if it:

- Targets outcomes that matter for people’s lived experience, not just economic aggregates.
- Uses causal evidence (including from life satisfaction data) to prioritize interventions with the largest impact on wellbeing.
- Accounts for trade-offs across domains and across groups.
- Tracks results using a coherent measurement system, including both subjective and objective indicators.

In practice, this shifts policy appraisal from “How does this affect one or two narrow outcomes?” to “How does this affect people’s lives, and for whom?”

## Role of life satisfaction

Even in a dashboard framework, life satisfaction plays a distinctive role:

- It provides a common unit for comparing disparate outcomes (e.g., unemployment vs. air pollution).
- It enables cost-effectiveness analysis in wellbeing terms, informing resource allocation.
- It serves as a validation tool: if improvements in indicators do not translate into higher life satisfaction, policy assumptions may need revisiting.
- Its centrality in a framework also plays a communication role, succinctly signaling that governments are charged ultimately with improving lives.

## Key implications for decision-making

- **Prioritization:** Evidence consistently shows large wellbeing gains from improving mental health, reducing unemployment, strengthening social connections, and enhancing trust in institutions — often exceeding gains from marginal income growth.
- **Prevention and early intervention:** Policies that reduce downstream harms (e.g., chronic illness, social isolation) yield high wellbeing returns.
- **Equity focus:** Wellbeing policy is inherently distribution-sensitive; improving outcomes for the worst-off often produces the largest aggregate gains.
- **Rat-race economics:** Growth in some kinds of conspicuous consumption can have a negative effect on wellbeing by fueling zero-sum status races, redirecting productive energy away from investments in social connections and collective progress. Cost-effective investment in public goods, by contrast, often affects everyone positively.

## Bottom line

“Wellbeing policy” in Canada is best understood as an evidence-based, multidimensional approach to governing for how people’s lives go, anchored by life satisfaction research. It complements traditional economic metrics with a richer account of human welfare, and embeds that account into budgeting, policy design, and evaluation.

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Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, July 2020

Introduction
Wellbeing budgeting is attractive because it promises to be able to integrate accounting of benefits, and link objectives across agencies and also across jurisdictions.

Introduction
Aligning policy under an overall quality of life framework is attractive for several reasons. It should help to correct from long-standing policy bias towards a market growth orientation.

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Desirable features
1 Separation of domains of expertise (and supports of wellbeing) from policy inter-

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Has COVID changed everything? Opportunities and priorities in the pandemic and recovery

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Introduction
What decisions confront governments when it comes to COVID-19? How do trade-offs among income, employment, mental health, physical health, public confidence, and other factors? What price should we assign to lockdowns?

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What's been learned?
There has not been broad public awareness on issues such as:
What matters: People may generally have new reflections on what matters most in life, what was missing during the pandemic, what is essential.
Disparities: Wellbeing has varied based on traditional predictors of disadvantage.

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How can sustainability enter a budgeting framework for human wellbeing?

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, August 2020

Introduction
Facing a choice of the economy as the environment? is a poisonous false dichotomy. It is politically divisive and represents a debilitating manner of cognitive distortions for the general public.

Why life satisfaction?
The science of wellbeing offers a way to compare costs and benefits across a wide variety of domains and policy options. Creating a separate metric to measure wellbeing is not a new idea.

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How does the science of wellbeing inform an education strategy across the life course?

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, March 2021

Introduction
Under a life satisfaction lens, the purpose of educating children should be to produce happy children and happy future adults, and to ensure society more broadly benefits through virtuous effects.

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Does education matter? 1
Action for Happiness school toolkits: 2
Positive Education: 2
Other educational initiatives: 3
A community ICT: 3
Across the life course: 3
Conclusion: 3

The world has changed
Why might we require a re-think about 'education' in Canada?
1. Static skills are insufficient. Lifelong training is essential. Institutional transformations are ahead.

Does education matter for wellbeing?
Most studies of education have focused on test scores as the outcome, rather than wellbeing.

BRIEFING NOTE (CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

Review of Department of Finance Canada's "Toward a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada"

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, June 2021

Introduction
In April 2021 in conjunction with the Federal Budget release, the Department of Finance published its work on a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada (Department of Finance, 2021). It is an excellent start along a long road. Below I offer some feedback for the Ministry to consider.

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Previous efforts
It is worthwhile noting that this is not the first wellbeing measurement framework put together, at considerable effort, by the Canadian federal government. For example, we have:
• Treasury Board of Canada, Quality of Life Indicators, 2004-2010
• NSDCQ indicator of Well-being in Canada (2009-2014) (used to be at http://well-being.mcgill.ca/)

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