



Department for
Communities and
Local Government

Understanding differences in life satisfaction between local authority areas

A summary of analysis based on the 2011/12 Annual
Population Survey

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Summary findings

Background

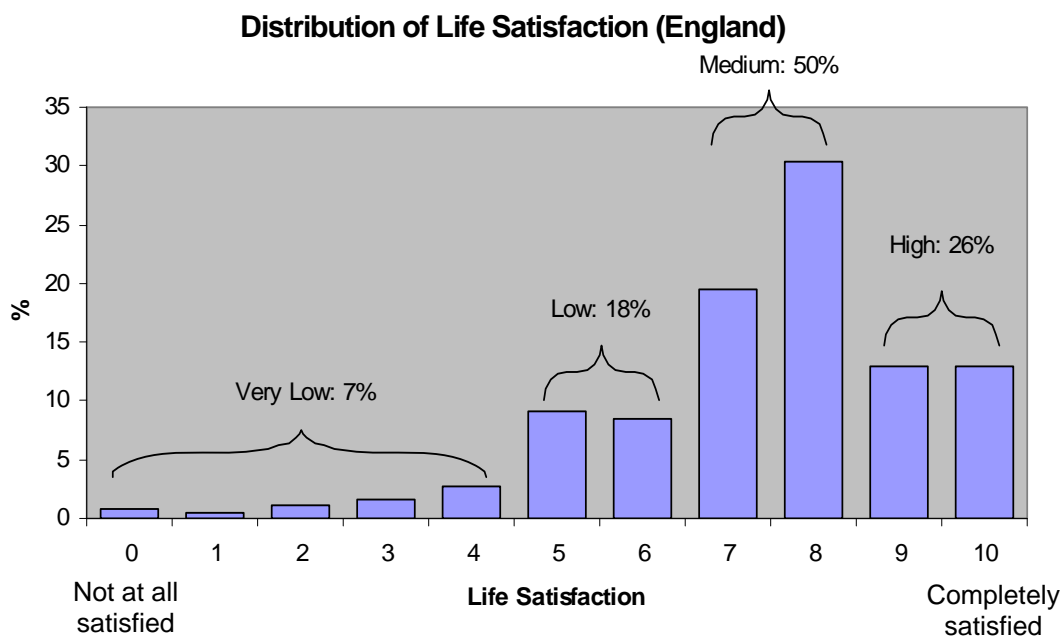
Differences in self-reported personal wellbeing between local authority areas can be large. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data for 2011/12 shows average ratings of life satisfaction among local authority districts range between 7.1 and 8.1 (out of 10). This one-point difference in average life satisfaction is almost as large as that between employed and unemployed people.

ONS have found the biggest drivers of life satisfaction are people's employment status, their health, and their relationships (in terms of their marital status). Insofar as ONS have been able to explain differences between local authority areas in the life satisfaction levels of their residents, they find differences between areas reflect the circumstances of the people who live there and whether the area is urban or rural; living in a rural area has a positive association with people's satisfaction.

Introduction

The ONS measures personal wellbeing through the Annual Population Survey, asking about people's life satisfaction (which is the focus of this report), feeling the things they do in life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety.

Respondents are asked to rate their life satisfaction in response to the question, 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?' on a scale of 0 to 10 where '0' means 'not at all satisfied', and '10' is 'completely satisfied'.



Nationally, the distribution of people's life satisfaction ratings is highly skewed and there is a long tail of low life satisfaction: 7 per cent of the population rate their satisfaction as 0 to 4.

This distribution is relevant in local policy making and delivery to address wellbeing issues: should efforts be focused on those people who are experiencing the lowest levels of wellbeing? Are there relatively cost-effective things that can be done to maintain or improve everyone's wellbeing?

But this distribution can differ markedly between places. In 2011/12, the proportion of adults rating their satisfaction from 0 to 4 ranged widely between local authority districts, from 1 per cent to 16 per cent, and the proportion who reported that they were almost, or completely satisfied with their lives (rating their satisfaction as a 9 or a 10) ranged from 11 per cent to 43 per cent.

DCLG analysts have conducted further analysis of the ONS data for 2011/12 on life satisfaction. The analysis explores differences between districts in how residents rate their life satisfaction in terms of the types of people who live there and attributes of the places themselves.

The full findings are presented in a powerpoint slidepack and can be downloaded at <http://www.slideshare.net/DCLGIntegration/131021-dclg-wellbeing-and-places>

There will, of course, be considerable variation in wellbeing *within* local authorities, at the neighbourhood level. DCLG has produced an interactive mapping tool for England which shows predicted estimates of wellbeing for each neighbourhood. This includes measures of life satisfaction, feeling the things you do in life are worthwhile, and happiness. The estimates have been modelled by analysts based on the geo-demographic characteristics of each neighbourhood. The resulting local maps can be compared with local data and knowledge about wellbeing, and used as a tool in engaging communities in discussing how to improve wellbeing.

The mapping tool can be accessed at www.opendatacommunities.org/wellbeing/map. Further information is given in an A3 poster which can be downloaded at <http://www.slideshare.net/DCLGIntegration/131021-dclg-predicting-neighbourhood-wellbeing-poster>

Main findings

The characteristics of places where a relatively high proportion of residents report very low life satisfaction correspond well with ONS's key drivers; these were generally areas with higher levels of poor health, disability or unemployment, and relatively few people living in large¹ market towns.

¹ Corrected from 'small' in an earlier published version.

Local authority areas where a relatively high proportion of residents report high life satisfaction are characterised by having large rural or market town populations, a relatively high proportion of retired people or younger couples without dependent children, and relatively few women working full time in the workforce. In addition to these factors, residents in these districts tended to report a high sense of belonging to their neighbourhood.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that actions to improve life satisfaction should be tailored to populations with very low and high life satisfaction.

In areas where a high proportion of residents rate their life satisfaction as very low, actions to increase employment and improve health outcomes should lead to improved wellbeing. Other initiatives to mitigate the detrimental impacts of ill-health, disability or unemployment on wellbeing could be considered. This could include delivering services in ways which meet people's needs for social contact and building social networks, and building their confidence. Actions could also focus on tackling anti-social behaviour and crime. The findings suggest a key role for Health and Wellbeing boards.

It may be possible to maintain or increase life satisfaction from moderate to high levels by increasing people's sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods and considering how some of the benefits of rural or market town living can be 'designed into' urban areas. This might include actions such as building community spirit and promoting volunteering; reducing the fear of crime; supporting wider community wellbeing through the design of housing and the built environment; maintaining a thriving high street and building a sense of distinct identity in areas.

Maintaining or increasing good employment opportunities is important in areas of high life satisfaction too, to meet the needs of all segments of the population, such as young people who might otherwise move away from the area.