

# 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 to trade off among income, unemployment, mental health, physical health, public confidence, and other factors? What price should we assign to loneliness?
- How to balance the wellbeing of different groups, including young and old, health workers and others?
- How to act in the face of uncertainty? and how to evaluate costs now and costs over the next decade?
- How to weigh death versus quality of life?

While the stakes are enormous and the uncertainties bewildering, this crisis in some sense presents a perfect example of the value of a life satisfaction framework which can integrate the expert priorities of epidemiologists, macroeconomists, and others.

This document has some starting thoughts for reflection on wellbeing budgeting in the (post-)pandemic context, but it is short on prescription.

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## What's been learned?

There may be new 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:** suffering has varied based on traditional predictors of disadvantage. The following have been publicly highlighted: ability to distance at work; ability to work from home; security of employment; pre-existing health; access to healthcare; housing security; housing density; violence at home;

health knowledge and practice; discrimination (esp Asian-looking people); household and childcare roles. There may now be a broader awareness of our universal vulnerability, and of who gets overlooked.

**Mental health:** we share a collective (unifying, equalizing) experience of anxiety, decreased cognitive function and productivity, and/or loneliness. These concerns have become visible and relevant.

**Skewed policy priorities:** we collectively watched society focus on avoidance of death and of macroeconomic disruption, without initial mention of mental wellbeing. The first focus on it was for healthcare workers; e.g., in one study 50% reported depression, 45% anxiety, 34% insomnia, and 72% distress. Loneliness-blind, married, older policy makers (internationally) advocated “social distancing.” This experience reflects the broader pattern in which policy tends to explicitly value physical health, avoidance of death, and economic activity while neglecting mental thriving.

**Dignity at end of life:** Canadians discovered the choices we are making for elders in need of full-time care — i.e., the embarrassing state of care in some elder care homes. It has been pointed out that 100 days of isolation from one’s loved ones is a significant fraction of life expectancy for many in care homes.

**Children’s welfare underrepresented:** No voice in halls of power to say “we are bored and miss our school friends”. Both current and future wellbeing of children are easily ignored in a crisis.

**Fresh air:** In some places and demographics, we’ve rediscovered the outdoors, exercise, walking our own streets, cycling, and holidays in local and provincial parks. We’ve experienced clear skies and pedestrian boulevards.

**Data:** In the U.K., the ONS deftly changed the OPN survey to weekly release, allowing tracking of life satisfaction, anxiety, loneliness, and other wellbeing-relevant measures through the epidemic.

**Banking and macro:** When it pays off, governments can mobilize unlimited resources. Reinvent macroeconomics and central banking (again)?

**Proactive governments:** Different outcomes are evident with different government approaches.<sup>1,2</sup> Patriotism and trust in government rewarded concrete action. Decisiveness and clarity are likely to minimize anxiety.

**Basic income:** The idea of something akin to a basic income is more familiar due to CERB and related policies.

**Appreciation of teachers:** Many parents thrust into home schooling may have renewed respect for resourcing teachers.

**Child care:** Those who can easily afford childcare may have renewed understanding of the value of universal childcare.

## Costs in terms of wellbeing

One study estimates the costs of the lockdown in the UK to be between 50% higher and 5000% higher than the benefits in terms of avoiding the worst mortality case scenario.<sup>3</sup>

The UK life satisfaction data show a nationwide drop of 0.7/10 during the lockdown — equivalent to the effect of an 80% drop in income. Most of this drop is due to those who lost social contact at work; those who could still go to their jobs did not suffer the drop.<sup>4</sup>

Another study, by McKinsey, estimates the pandemic’s impact on wellbeing (life satisfaction) in April to be 3.5 times the losses to GDP.<sup>5</sup>

Another estimates the wellbeing costs of the lockdown and pandemic in the UK to be around

\$3.89B/day, or \$75/day per adult.<sup>6</sup> At its low point, the nation as a whole was just under the threshold for psychiatric morbidity. They note higher effects on life satisfaction for women than men, and that “essential” workers experienced higher life satisfaction even while suffering from more anxiety than other workers.

Another study uses life satisfaction accounting to combine effects from benefits (income, unemployment, mental health, confidence in government, schooling) and costs (COVID-19 deaths, more road deaths, more commuting time, more CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, worse air quality) to recommend a date to release the lockdown. They concluded in April that a June 1 date was best.<sup>7</sup>

Another life satisfaction researcher has taken a strident advocacy stance for a radically less restrictive approach to COVID control and mitigation, based on aggregating effects across all determinants of wellbeing.<sup>8</sup>

## Data

As mentioned above, the U.K. has closely tracked life satisfaction, other subjective well-being, and other aspects of life relevant to the pandemic, making data available weekly and with minimal delay, rather than monthly or, as in the case of Statistics Canada social surveys, by year, two years after the fact.

Possibly as a result, there seems to be a vast array of studies on what has happened and what should be done for the U.K. A wealth of such evidence is being compiled by What Works Wellbeing, crowd-sourcing from researchers.<sup>9</sup>

## Death

The most contentious cost-benefit task may be the incorporation of the value of avoiding additional death in a framework which can evaluate the quality of life of the living. A greatly under-emphasized piece here is to properly take account

of the quality of life of the dying, but besides that, as in all health care accounting, the experience of the survivors and carers is also typically underconsidered.

In any case, two recent frameworks explicitly treat death in a life satisfaction approach to cost-benefit accounting (Happiness Research Institute, 2020; Frijters et al., 2020). These approaches define “WALY”s or “WELLBY”s which use all-encompassing life satisfaction to avoid the well-documented problems with QALYs and DALYs.

This approach has been used to recommend a date to release the COVID lock-down (see section above).

## We are social beings

Many of the channels by which our jobs, consumption, and other activities support our wellbeing are ultimately of a social nature. Even the ways we benefit from income have turned out to have deeply social components. It is for this reason that a broad, accountable, measurable wellbeing approach is important for broadly-impactful decisions.

It means that loneliness, alienation, discrimination, and exclusion should be top of mind for high-cost downside risks in future COVID-19 policy. At the same time, positive social influences on wellbeing must be considered just as seriously as positive material supports: for instance, the ability to give and to help others and to do something meaningful each day, to maintain societal and social roles and identities, to maintain social connections, to experience regular skin-to-skin contact<sup>10</sup>, and so on.

## Non-cognitive skills

One of the most promising possibilities for improving quality of life, generally, may be to offer more training to adults (through lifelong learn-

ing) and children (in school) in non-cognitive — i.e., social and emotional — skills. These include understanding and managing emotions, goal-setting, building lasting and positive relationships, empathy, love, ethics, problem-solving, management, leadership, child-rearing, intimate relationships, mental hygiene, mental first-aid, and self-care.

Interestingly, some disadvantaged groups have shown higher resilience and more stable life satisfaction, during the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> During continued lock-down, during subsequent outbreaks, and for thriving in an altered normal that emerges in the long run, more policy attention should be given to these low-cost, high-potential investments.

Astronauts and polar researchers are able to prepare for loneliness and social isolation. Yet for much of the history of astronautics, mental health and social interactions were overlooked in favour of concerns about physical health, even in the context of long-term missions. This has changed.

Once one recognizes the scope of damages that are likely to result from physical distancing, lock-down, and stoppage of work, there are plenty of interventions to be encouraged or fa-

cilitated to mitigate the negative effects on well-being. From mental exercises and self-care to proactive social initiatives, story-telling, active learning, exercise, and etc, insights from life satisfaction can be turned into supportive policy and advice. The World Wellbeing Panel has collected such advice from life satisfaction researchers.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, in addition to including more non-cognitive skill training in school, we need to know the proper short- and long-run value of education, including non-cognitive learning, social interactions, physical contact, etc, when removing children from school.

## Decisions: recovery

Ultimately, COVID-19 will be a paradigm shift as much as an interruption to normal life. Leveraging all the knowledge about what promotes well-being at work and home will be important to shift society towards new norms.

Above all: enormous fiscal expansion means enormous choice for direction, i.e., to back-cast from better futures we want. Disruption means an opportunity to re-think broadly, in light of knowledge about what makes for a good life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup><https://arxiv.org/pdf/2004.12129.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/business/economy/europe-us-jobless-coronavirus.html>

<sup>3</sup><https://journal.sketchingscience.org/users/333926/articles/460021-living-with-covid-19-balancing-costs-against-benefits-in-the-face-of-the-virus>

<sup>4</sup><https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/the-wellbeing-costs-of-physical-distancing/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/europe/well-being-in-europe-addressing-the-high-cost-of-covid-19-on-life-satisfaction>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.jacobs.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/jacobs-wellbeing-costs-of-covid-19-uk.pdf>

<sup>7</sup><http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/occasional/op049.pdf>

<sup>8</sup><https://clubtrotppo.com.au/2020/03/21/the-corona-dilemma/>

<sup>9</sup>[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BQfQFPRv-RP9WGZX-E\\_xe0l8xX3IS4OwhiB\\_SfhPFK0](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BQfQFPRv-RP9WGZX-E_xe0l8xX3IS4OwhiB_SfhPFK0)

<sup>10</sup><https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/the-wellbeing-costs-of-physical-distancing>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.brookings.edu/research/well-being-and-mental-health-amid-covid-19-differences-in-resilience-across-minorities-and-whites>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.barcelonagse.eu/research/world-wellbeing-panel/covid-19-pandemic>

# References

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Frijters, Paul et al. (2020). "A happy choice: wellbeing as the goal of government". In: *Behavioural Public Policy* 4.2, pp. 126–165.

Happiness Research Institute (2020). *Wellbeing Adjusted Life Years: A universal metric to quantify the happiness return on investment*. Berlin. URL: <https://cntr.click/XkYNqV6>.

What Works Centre for Wellbeing (Mar. 2018). *Wellbeing in policy analysis*. URL: <http://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Overview-incorporating-wellbeing-in-policy-analysis-vMarch2018.pdf>.

# Other briefs in this series

<p><b>BRIEFING NOTE</b> (V. 2021-03-27, CHECK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1</p> <p><b>What would a pan-jurisdictional wellbeing-budgeting framework look like?</b></p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh McGill University July 2020</p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh/McGill.ca @barringtonleigh research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca</p> <p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>Wellbeing budgeting is attractive because it promises to be able to integrate accounting of benefits, and link decisions, across agencies and also across jurisdictions. A sensible conception of human wellbeing, rooted in individual experience, does not change its meaning according to which jurisdiction is asking. In the end it does not matter for wellbeing which jurisdiction was responsible for a positive change. Such differently wellbeing outcomes of policy are essentially linked across jurisdictional levels, as well as across traditional thematic domains of policy.</p> <p>In addition: (a) Capacity and resources vary with jurisdictional level. (b) The ability to compare and benchmark with peer municipalities and provinces is an important feature when building measurement frameworks. (c) Learning with local government to research and design its own framework, when those would in the end be policy if commonly, would be a timely efficiency. And (d) no local jurisdiction can generate enough evidence or expertise to provide it with the best knowledge on how policies will affect wellbeing, having some consistent indicators across the country provides a common evidence base for wellbeing budgeting.</p> <p>All this is to say that the shared responsibility and funding for many factors influencing wellbeing make collaboration, coordination and even a shared vision important. An ideal wellbeing budgeting framework in Canada would be designed to serve all jurisdictional levels, while allowing local governments to choose the extent to which they adopt common measures or adopt their own content. Therefore, any federally-designed framework should go beyond federal government's needs, in order that it can offer all jurisdictions a toolkit (or several) for indicator measurement, and a toolkit for decision making.</p> <p>This note outlines some suggested features of an integrative wellbeing budgeting framework. It also emphasizes why asking which supports wellbeing relates to a greater level of government is important. And it suggests how to use a wellbeing dashboard.</p> <p><b>Desirable features</b></p> <p>A pan-jurisdictional offering will offer (but not impose):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. shared menu of measurable indicators, and by the foundation for a common decision score across multiple traditional policy boundaries where comprehensive measures of outcomes were possible. Some good features include:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separation of domains of expertise (and support of wellbeing) from policy areas</li> <li>• version options</li> <li>• Ability of indicators of wellbeing to be expressed at different geographic scales</li> <li>• Peer comparability: some commonality in measure across regions</li> <li>• Common evidence base for choosing wellbeing supporting policy. Total region can leverage expertise elsewhere.</li> <li>• Integration and synergy of accounting of public benefits across jurisdictions</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	<p><b>BRIEFING NOTE</b> (V. 2021-03-27, CHECK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1</p> <p><b>Integrating a wellbeing budgeting framework with existing priorities and commitments</b></p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh McGill University July 2020</p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh/McGill.ca @barringtonleigh research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca</p> <p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>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 narrow growth orientation. It may help to align work across agencies and to build more integrative policies. It should help to communicate government's ultimate goals and its accountability to its broad population of Canadians.</p> <p>Objective measures can inform us about levels of income and employment and housing in a society, but they can never tell us what we feel like to be poor or rich, to be unemployed or underemployed, to have no private space, or to live alone in a house, to give preference to visiting friends across departments and agencies, a life satisfaction approach is likely, first of all, to respond and engage outcomes based policy making in terms of existing objectives. An ultimate promise is that it can provide both intuitive meaning and analytic solution to any array of objective goals.</p> <p><b>Contents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SDGs</li> <li>2. Urbanism</li> <li>3. Poverty Reduction Strategy</li> <li>4. Loneliness &amp; Vivos Ensemble</li> <li>5. GBA+</li> <li>6. Equity</li> <li>7. National Housing Strategy</li> <li>8. Net-Zero Carbon Strategy</li> <li>9. Health for All Policies</li> <li>10. Truth and Reconciliation</li> </ul> <p><b>SDGs</b></p> <p>The SDGs and their measurement framework are a set of goals, like those to tick, with an intended way to prioritize across them. Nevertheless, the task to create an index which combines all of these goals presents policy makers with a design challenge.</p> <p>There is a tendency to create indices of progress or wellbeing which combine multiple, disparate outcomes with entirely arbitrary weights, leaving them undifferentiated upon scrutiny, even after attracting initial public and political attention. Worse, such indices often confuse, i.e., add together, measures related to human experience with measures related to ecological limits. An example is the simple (single) index created to track the highly influential UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is a sum of 169 numbers, all treated as equally important, which cover the disparate ideas captured by the SDGs. On <i>Scale and Scope</i> (2020) see</p>	<p><b>BRIEFING NOTE</b> (V. 2021-03-27, CHECK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1</p> <p><b>Has COVID changed everything? Opportunities and priorities in the pandemic and RECOVERY</b></p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh McGill University August 2020</p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh/McGill.ca @barringtonleigh research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca</p> <p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>What decisions confront governments when it comes to COVID-19?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How to trade off among income, employment, mental health, physical health, public confidence, and other factors? What price should we assign to lives?</li> <li>- How to balance the wellbeing of different groups, including young and old, health workers and others?</li> <li>- How to act in the face of uncertainty? and how to isolate costs and costs over the next decade?</li> <li>- How to weigh death versus quality of life?</li> </ul> <p>While the state, an economy and the uncertainty handling, this crisis in some sense presents a perfect example of the value of a life satisfaction framework which can integrate the expert practices of epidemiologists, macroeconomists, and others.</p> <p>This document has some starting thoughts for reflection on wellbeing budgeting in the (post-)pandemic context, but it is short on prescription.</p> <p><b>Contents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What's been learned?</li> <li>2. Costs in terms of wellbeing</li> <li>3. Data</li> <li>4. Death</li> <li>5. We are social beings</li> <li>6. Non-cognitive skills</li> <li>7. Decisions: necessary</li> </ul> <p><b>What's been learned?</b></p> <p>There may be new broad public awareness on issues such as:</p> <p><b>What matters:</b> People may generally have new reflections on what matters most in life, what was missing during the pandemic, what is essential.</p> <p><b>Deparities:</b> suffering has varied based on traditional predictors of disadvantage. The following have been publicly highlighted: ability to distance at work; ability to work from home; security of employment; pre-existing health; access to healthcare; housing security; housing density; violence at home.</p>	<p><b>BRIEFING NOTE</b> (V. 2021-03-27, CHECK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1</p> <p><b>How can sustainability enter a budgeting framework for human wellbeing?</b></p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh McGill University August 2020</p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh/McGill.ca @barringtonleigh research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca</p> <p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>Facing a choice of "the economy or the environment" is a notorious false dichotomy. It is politically divisive and represents a debilitating source of cognitive dissonance for the general public. Framing our actions as impossible choices is, naturally, unhelpful. Regardless of the true costs we face, humans need a positive vision of the future to liberate our most creative, analytic, empathetic, open, and pro-social sides.</p> <p>Fortunately, insights about human wellbeing provide for future trajectories which are both positive and feasible (Barrington-Leigh 2017). Nevertheless, these potential benefits of a life satisfaction framing can be lost when measures of progress take on conflicting goals, undermining our ability to advocate for either wellbeing or sustainability.</p> <p>A key challenge is that uncertainty about long term outcomes can overwhelm decision processes in the short term. Calculating or articulating budget tradeoffs between near-term benefits and the most uncertain (likely) and long-run outcomes is doomed to fail when it is not possible to precisely quantify the latter side of the equation. Bringing such issues together presents productive resource allocation from happening in the present, largely by collating objectives and dividing resources.</p> <p>This note outlines some government approaches to conceptualize sustainable wellbeing and warns against associated pitfalls. I advocate for keeping the notion of wellbeing, and its practical application, separate from a historical approach to ecological constraints. This framework focuses on promoting the compelling objective of wellbeing, while separating out the more peripheral long-run considerations. More (non-technical) detail is available in a 25-page paper.</p> <p><b>Why life satisfaction?</b></p> <p>Traditional macroeconomic indicators like the growth rate, inflation, or unemployment. Like the satisfaction is associated with steps towards fulfillment in the best long-term direction and with the right thing in France.</p> <p>Based on what is known about the determinants of life satisfaction, it seems feasible to engineer a society with high life satisfaction but which is running down the resource left for future generations. If government policy is to shift towards an accountability to human wellbeing, how do we incorporate ecological health and sustainability into our objectives?</p>
<p><b>BRIEFING NOTE</b> (V. 2021-03-29, CHECK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1</p>			
<p><b>How does the science of wellbeing inform an education strategy across the life course?</b></p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh McGill University March 2021</p> <p>Chris Barrington-Leigh/McGill.ca @barringtonleigh research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca</p> <p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p>Under a life satisfaction lens, the purpose of educating children should be to produce happy children and happy future adults, and to benefit society more broadly through spill-over effects. However, investment in education does not enjoy such children. Research on a number of fronts, including the science of happiness, gives us reasons to regard and revise our investments in education.</p> <p>The science behind life wellbeing encompasses to primary school through to retirement. In all cases, non-cognitive skills like understanding and managing emotions, goal setting, building lasting and positive relationships, empathy, love, ethics, problem-solving, managing, leadership, child-rearing, intimate relationships, mental health, mental first aid, and self-care play an important role.</p> <p>The scope of the affect research transcends jurisdictional boundaries.</p> <p><b>Contents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The world has changed</li> <li>2. Does education matter?</li> <li>3. Action for Happiness youth toolkits</li> <li>4. Positive Education</li> <li>5. Other wellbeing initiatives</li> <li>6. A community ICT</li> <li>7. Across the life course</li> <li>8. Conclusion</li> </ul> <p><b>The world has changed</b></p> <p>Why might we require a rethink about "education" in Canada?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Static skills are insufficient; lifelong training is essential, industrial transformation is ahead</li> <li>2. Policy objectives are shifting towards wellbeing</li> <li>3. Longer lifespan requires new life skills at different stages (career progression, retirement)</li> <li>4. Value of social and emotional skills in workplace: now better understood</li> <li>5. Insights from science of happiness, e.g., value of social and emotional skills in well-being, and the importance of the wellbeing of those delivering services as well as the recipients</li> <li>6. Insights from epigenetics, neuroplasticity, and intergenerational transmission</li> <li>7. Application of neurodiversity: benefits to individuals and society from non-cognitive skill training</li> <li>8. Learning modes shifting to on-line, diverse, and private</li> <li>9. It's 2021 and we still have persistent inequalities</li> </ol>			