

# State of the Nation 2019: Children and Young People's Wellbeing

## Introduction and background

**Robust evidence lies at the heart of understanding children's and young people's wellbeing; it is the key to identifying children and young people most in need of support. In October 2018, the then prime minister Theresa May committed to publishing a State of the Nation report to bring together evidence about the state of children and young people's wellbeing and to guide future policy. This latest report reports new statistics on wellbeing for children and young people in England and examines the variation in wellbeing for different subgroups.**

**The report also draws on a wider set of indicators of children and young people's lives, looking at factors such as appearance, health and experiences of family and relationships. It includes an in-depth analysis on the psychological wellbeing of teenage girls; a group which has been identified as particularly risk of low wellbeing.**

## Key findings

### Wellbeing in children in England

- The data for this section of the report covers children aged 10 to 15. It comes from Wave 8 of the Understanding Society UK Longitudinal Household Survey (UKHLS) which was conducted in 2016-17.
- On a scale of 1-7, with 7 representing the highest level of life satisfaction, 84.9 per cent of children gave a score of 5 or above, indicating that they were relatively happy with their lives overall. Just 5 per cent gave a score of 3 or below, indicating that they were relatively unhappy.
- Older children aged 13-15 reported lower levels of happiness with their lives. There were no significant differences by gender or ethnicity.
- An examination of changes over time shows that there has been a slight decrease in average rates of wellbeing since 2009. Furthermore, the gap between younger and older children appears to be widening.
- In 2009-10, females reported a slightly higher level of happiness than males. However, in all the years since, females have reported lower levels of happiness, although the difference was only statistically significant between 2013 and 2015.
- Looking at average wellbeing rates alone can mask changes in wellbeing levels amongst the smaller proportion who report poor wellbeing.
- The report sought to address the question as to whether pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those with special educational needs (SEN) have lower levels of wellbeing. In order to do this, the authors looked at data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England 2 (LSYPE2) which was undertaken in 2014-15. In this study, 4 key questions were used to measure wellbeing.
- In terms of average wellbeing, no distinct difference was found between FSM pupils and their non-FSM peers. However, a lower proportion of FSM pupils reported that they had a high level of life satisfaction, a feeling of life being worthwhile and a feeling of happiness yesterday.

- Pupils with SEN were as likely as their non-SEN peers to be in high or very high categories for life satisfaction, feeling that life was worthwhile and happiness. However, it must be remembered that this particular study captures one particular group of children at a particular time. Previous studies into wellbeing amongst FSM and SEN pupils have found lower wellbeing in these groups, but findings vary depending on the measures used. Looking at all the available data and at the literature, it appears that FSM/SEN status is not in and of itself a consistent indicator of poor wellbeing.

### Wellbeing in young people aged 16-24

- Data for this part of the report comes from the Annual Population Survey, which uses the ONS4 questions to measure respondents' satisfaction with their lives, how worthwhile they feel their life is, and levels of happiness and anxiety experienced yesterday. This data covers the period from October 2017-September 2018.
- Most young people (82.1%) reported high or very high life satisfaction and just 3 per cent reported low life satisfaction. A majority of 80.3 per cent rated their feeling of life being worthwhile as high or very high and 74 per cent reported that their happiness yesterday was high or very high.
- However, 20.2 per cent of young people rated their anxiety yesterday as high. Low or very low anxiety was reported by 62.6 per cent – this was a less positive result than for the other wellbeing measures.
- A lower proportion of 20-24-year olds reported high life satisfaction compared to 16-19-year-olds, echoing the pattern amongst children and young people.
- The largest gender difference was in levels of anxiety. A greater proportion of females reported that they had experienced a very high level of anxiety yesterday and fewer females reported low anxiety.

- Lower anxiety levels, but also lower ratings of life satisfaction were found amongst young people from a Black African, Caribbean, and Black British background than amongst those from a White background.
- It is important to examine whether the decrease in wellbeing as young people move into adulthood is due to biological processes or to social factors such as employment, health, family experiences or quality of friendships.

#### **Wider indicators on the wellbeing of children and young people**

- This part of the report focusses on children's relationships, their health, their feelings about their appearance and their experiences of school and of bullying. The data on relationships, health, appearance and school are from the above-mentioned UKHLS Wave 8 study which covered children aged 10-15. The data on bullying are taken from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.
- Children reported high levels of happiness with their family and friends overall, with 94.0 per cent reporting feeling relatively happy with their family and 91.6 per cent feeling relatively happy with their friends. Happiness with friends and family declined as children got older, although the differences were small.
- UK-wide data shows that children's happiness with family has remained unchanged since 2009, but happiness with friends has decreased slightly.
- Children were happy with their health; 94.5 per cent reported that they had good or very good health. However, this dropped as children got older with 92.7 per cent of 13-15-year-olds reporting good or very good health.
- Of the factors looked at, children were least happy about their appearance; just 73.8 per cent were relatively happy with their appearance. Girls reported considerably lower happiness with appearance, with 70.1 per cent reporting that they were relatively happy compared to 77.8 per cent of boys. Happiness with appearance declined with age; 79.9 per cent of 10-12-year-olds were relatively happy with their appearance, compared to 67.8 per cent of 13-15-year-olds.
- Overall, 75.8 per cent of children were relatively happy with their school and 79 per cent were relatively happy with their schoolwork. Happiness with schoolwork remained stable with age, but happiness with school decreased; 81 per cent of 10-12-year-olds were happy with their school compared to 70.7 per cent of 13-15 year-olds. Trends data shows that happiness with school and schoolwork has remained stable since 2009.
- Data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales show that in 2018, 17 per cent of children reported being bullied.
- There are widely different rates of bullying across different groups of children. Groups who were more likely to report having been bullied were those of a white ethnic origin, those with a long-term illness or disability, those who received extra help at school, and those from deprived areas.
- Rates of bullying decline as children get older. In 2018, 22 per cent of 10-year-olds reported having been bullied in the previous 12 months, compared to 8 per cent of 15-year-olds. This means that bullying is unlikely to be a factor in the decrease in wellbeing as children get older.
- Although the frequency of bullying overall did not vary by gender, there were stark differences when it came to cyber-bullying. In 2018, 9 per cent of females reported incidences of cyber-bullying, compared to 5 per cent of males. This difference has persisted since 2013-14.
- Several groups reporting higher levels of bullying do not report lower levels of wellbeing. This implies that bullying is

not the sole driver of wellbeing. It is possible that protective factors such as high-quality friendships and good family relationships play a role.

#### **Psychological health in teenage girls**

- Data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England 2 (LSYPE2) were used to examine the factors associated with psychological health in teenage girls aged 14-15 and 17-18.
- In both age groups, data show that the psychological health of girls is significantly worse than that of boys. For both girls and boys there is a clear drop in psychological health in later adolescence.
- For girls aged 14-15, the factors most strongly associated with psychological health were whether they were being bullied, how often they saw friends, feeling safe in school, getting enough sleep and whether they had engaged in 3 or more risky behaviours. A positive attitude to school was also associated with better psychological health, along with having a higher perceived locus of control. Social media had one of the smallest effect sizes of all those examined.
- For girls aged 17-18, many factors remained similar. However, bullying became a less important factor with the association with psychological health just half of what it was in 14-15-year-olds.
- Girls aged 17-18 who were gay or bisexual had lower levels of psychological health than those who were heterosexual. Sexuality was not examined in the 13-14 age group.
- In both age groups, more economically disadvantaged girls report better psychological health. This finding is in line with other studies which have reported a link between economic advantage and poorer wellbeing. One possible reason for this is that some risk factors for poor wellbeing may be more prevalent in high-income backgrounds, e.g. pressure to succeed or fear of not fitting in with peers. friends.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2019-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing>