

Measuring changes in people's wellbeing

May 2020

The General Social Survey

The New Zealand General Social Survey (GSS) provides information on the wellbeing of New Zealanders aged 15 years and over. It contains a range of questions spanning many different domains of wellbeing, and includes both subjective measures, such as life satisfaction, and objective information, such as income.

The Integrated Data Infrastructure

The Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) is a research database maintained by Stats NZ containing administrative and survey data. The data is linked together at an individual-level before all personally identifying information is removed. Stats NZ reviews all research results to make sure individuals can not be identified.

Wellbeing changes using before/after comparisons

The Social Wellbeing Agency has developed a research approach to measuring the wellbeing changes of people's experiences. It is well suited to measuring changes associated with an intervention, service delivery, or a policy change.

The approach uses linked data, such as that found in the IDI, to connect information about the people and the experience of interest with wellbeing measures drawn from the GSS.

Differences in timing between the experience and the survey allow us to construct groups for comparison.

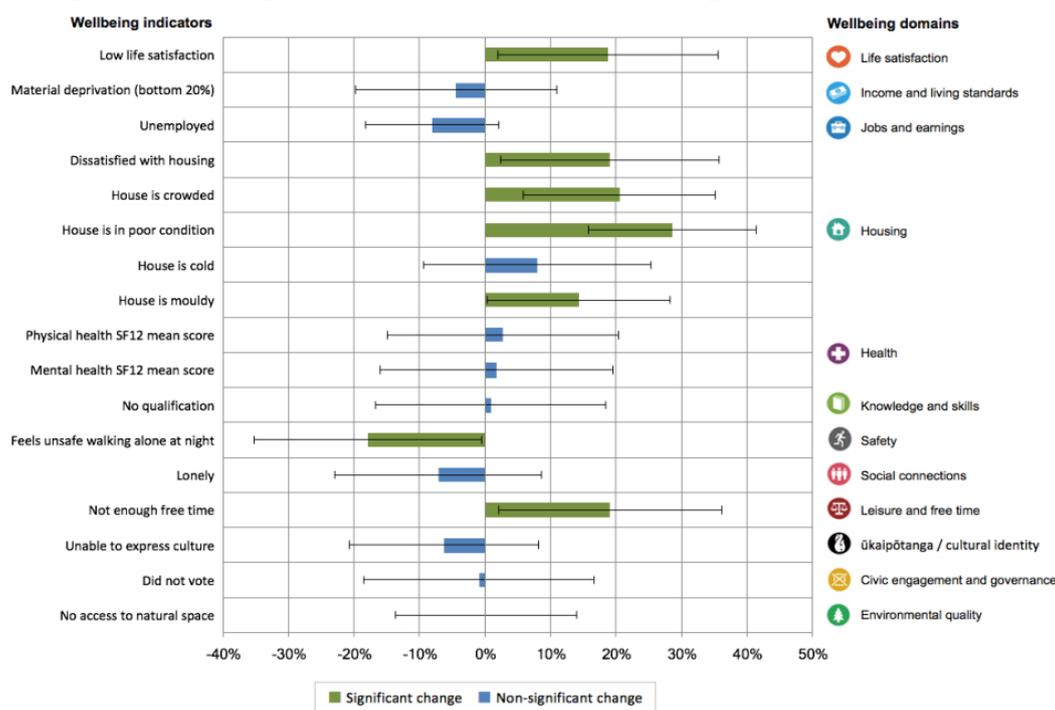
- A "Before" group who answered the GSS a short time before the experience.
- An "After" group who answered the GSS a short time after the experience.

The impact of the experience can then be estimated by the difference between the Before and After groups.

Change can be observed across wellbeing domains

Using the GSS enables the measurement of many wellbeing domains. The figure below gives an example of results produced using this method. It is drawn from our first application of this approach as documented in the working paper 'Measuring the wellbeing impacts of public policy: social housing'. The research methodology has since been applied elsewhere, including people transitioning off benefits and into employment.

Figure: Change in wellbeing before and after social housing



Strengths & limitations

The strengths of the approach include:

- Changes in wellbeing domains can be measured even for domains not directly related to the experience of interest.
- Research approach adapts easily to different experiences, and different choices of wellbeing measures.
- Data collection of the GSS survey and people's experiences of interest is independent. This means that wellbeing does not have to be measured as part of service provision, and that the decision to analyse the impact of an experience can take place much later than the experience.

The limitations of the approach include:

- The results are a comparison of before and after groups. Hence, unlike a comparison of randomised treatment and control groups, inferring causality is difficult.
- As analysis is limited to people who have both had the experience of interest **and answered the GSS**, for many experiences the sample size will be too small. At least 1% of New Zealanders having the experience of interest is recommended.
- As we have only a single before or after observation for each person, the method is not suited to examining long-term impacts