

Measuring National Well-Being Before and During COVID-19

Covid-19 has had dire implications for national well-being. New research shows that well-being has not declined evenly across all domains of human flourishing.



The Human Flourishing Program

at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science

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*Tyler J. VanderWeele Ph.D.
Human Flourishing*

The Covid-19 pandemic has had potentially dire implications for well-being. However, surprising [new research published in the Journal of General Internal Medicine](#) by researchers from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University and the American Bible Society shows that well-being has declined in some domains more than others.

On a scale from zero to ten, measures of physical and mental health have dropped by seven-tenths of a point

(from 6.9 to 6.2), as have happiness and life satisfaction (down from 7.1 to 6.4). The largest decline was for financial and material stability which went down nearly an entire point (down from 5.7 to 4.8). These are large declines. In statistical terms, they are about a third of a standard deviation, meaning that they reflect a fall for the average American from the 50th percentile to the 37th percentile of the original flourishing distribution.

Other domains of flourishing have not been as severely affected. The changes in meaning and purpose, or in character, or even in social relationships were much more modest. With self-report assessments of social relationships, the change was less than two-tenths of a point (a modest decline from 6.9 to 6.7).

One of the other important and interesting aspects of the data, however, is that the variance of the responses increased across all the flourishing domains. Individual experiences in each

flourishing domain are more variable and wide-ranging now than they were prior to the pandemic. So while social relationship scores have gone down on average only slightly, this is true in part because significant declines in this area for some (perhaps especially those living alone) have been partially offset by modest gains for others.

[Human Flourishing Program Director, Prof. Tyler VanderWeele](#), says, "[My own family's life and flourishing has been](#) affected in many ways that mirror the national well-being data. We are less happy and have had greater concerns over physical and mental health. Our sense of meaning and purpose and character have been challenged, but there have also been opportunities for growth; with regard to social relationships, while there have been real losses with friendship and community, we have also experienced a deeper investment in both immediate family and extended family."

Researchers examined the domains of happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material security. Data were collected on a national sample of individuals representative of the United States on geographic region, age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and religious self-identification with 1,010 individuals in January of 2020 (prior to the World Health Organization declaration of the pandemic) and a similar sample of 3,020 individuals in June of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic.

REFERENCES

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The Human Flourishing Program, founded in 2016, studies and promotes human flourishing and develops systematic approaches to the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines.

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