



Analysis of Subjective Wellbeing Datasets

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Background

In 2010 the PM committed to “start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life”. He has asked the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to measure national wellbeing.

In response ONS has established a national programme to develop and publish an accepted and trusted set of statistics for wellbeing, to complement traditional economic measures such as GDP and to offer a more rounded account of national progress. A national debate on ‘what matters to you?’ was held in the early part of 2011 and the findings developed into a wellbeing measurement framework. Some of the measures in this framework are objective and describe the social and economic conditions of individuals, for example employment and life expectancy. However, it is well known that objective indicators do not capture people’s experiences and how they actually feel about their own or society’s progress. There are many cases where subjective assessments by individuals are in tension with objective measures. For example, perceptions of crime, or fear of crime, often do not reflect actual levels of crime. As a result ONS is also measuring subjective wellbeing — an individual’s personal assessment of their life, including life satisfaction, happiness, anxiety and meaningfulness of day to day actions. Early experimental results were published in December 2011. Further data was released in February 2012, with the first full year of data published in July 2012 and the first annual report following in November 2012.

Cabinet Office has been working across Whitehall to encourage analysis of the early wellbeing data that has been released, and also to consider how wellbeing can be reflected in policy. To this end analysts in Cabinet Office have conducted some short pieces of analysis to start to understand how wellbeing relates to a range of areas of policy. It is important to point out that:

- This analysis is mostly on experimental data
- Where we have analysed ONS data, we have focused on the 6-month dataset from April to October 2011. Results could well differ from those released by ONS on a full year’s worth of data. This data is now available and the analysis will be updated where appropriate.
- These are deliberately short pieces of analysis to begin to explore the data only. They are not meant to be full research papers – and in some cases raise more questions.

Most importantly, while all of these papers focus on Subjective Wellbeing (SWB), it needs to be clear that National Wellbeing is much broader than SWB alone. A measurement framework has been developed which draws on indicators from nine other domains of wellbeing. So here we only focus on a partial, albeit important, dimension of wellbeing.