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Charting change: How time-series data provides insights on Canadian well-being

by Helen Foran

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Overview of the study

This study uses data from multiple waves of the Canadian Social Survey (CSS) to examine trends in three key Quality of Life indicators: life satisfaction, financial well-being, and future outlook. Monitoring these well-being indicators following periods of considerable social and economic change is particularly important in identifying possible vulnerabilities and areas of intervention. Since the summer of 2021, the CSS has collected quarterly data capturing the latter part of the COVID-19 pandemic, the end of post-pandemic relief programs (which had helped uplift some from poverty), as well as the rising cost of living in Canada. This regular tracking allows for an understanding of how Canadians are coping with these shifts.

- In the summer of 2021 (Q3 of 2021), over half (54.0%) of Canadians reported high levels of life satisfaction. By the winter of 2024 (Q1 of 2024), fewer people were feeling this way, with less than half (48.6%) reporting a high level of satisfaction with their lives.
- Some groups have experienced more notable declines in life satisfaction between the summer of 2021 (Q3 of 2021) and the winter of 2024 (Q1 of 2024). For example, the proportion of racialized Canadians reporting high levels of life satisfaction fell from 52.7% to 40.6%, representing a 4.9 percentage point annual decrease over the study period. In comparison, life satisfaction among non-racialized Canadians had a more modest decline, from 54.5% in the summer of 2021 to 51.5% at the beginning 2024 (a 0.8 percentage point annual decrease).
- Financial vulnerability is associated with lower and declining levels of life satisfaction. Throughout the study period (Q3 of 2021 to Q1 of 2024), less than one-third (29%) of those experiencing financial hardship reported high levels of life satisfaction, with their reported life satisfaction decreasing at a rate of 2.1 percentage points per year.
- Two in five (39.9%) Canadians between the ages of 25 and 54 reported finding it difficult to meet their financial needs in the winter of 2024. This represented an 8.1 annual percentage point increase since the beginning of the CSS in the summer of 2021 (Q3 of 2021).
- Financial well-being is linked to future outlook. Among those who experienced financial difficulties, less than half (45%) reported a hopeful outlook, compared to more than two in three (67%) of those who were not experiencing financial difficulties.

Introduction

According to the Organization for Economic and Co-operation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index, [Canadians rated their life satisfaction a 7 out of 10, higher than the OECD average of 6.7 out of 10](#) in 2020. While Canada has consistently ranked among the top countries in many dimensions of well-being, as per the OECD Better Life Index, results from the Canadian Social Survey (CSS) suggest a decline in how Canadians perceive and experience their quality of life.

Since early 2021, many Canadians have felt the effects of rising prices, notably food, transportation and housing costs. The rising cost of living occurred during the same period when benefits related to the COVID-19 pandemic were discontinued and pandemic-related modifications to the Employment Insurance (EI) program were removed, which together had served to lower the poverty rate.¹ While inflation has decelerated since hitting its peak at [8.1% in June of 2022](#),² many Canadians are still facing financial hardship.

The CSS, carried out quarterly during this period, has been able to capture how indicators such as self-assessed life satisfaction and future outlook are trending downward. Meanwhile, self-reported financial difficulty is increasing, as is the concern over its impact on well-being. By providing consistent and timely data, the CSS makes it possible to observe changes related to the well-being of Canadians over time,³ through the lens of the [Quality of Life Framework](#). This Framework is multi-dimensional and aimed at measuring progress beyond GDP, capturing information on

health, education, prosperity, social cohesion, and the environment, among other indicators.⁴

This article examines declines in Canadians' well-being over the past few years, and how these downward changes vary across different segments of the population. Life satisfaction, financial difficulty, and future outlook are key Quality of Life indicators that were analyzed using a time-series approach from the first wave of the CSS in the summer of 2021 (Q3 of 2021) to the winter of 2024 (Q1 of 2024). It is worth noting that the data is not adjusted for seasonality. Similarly, another limitation is the potential for survey framing effects, which refers to how the respondent's line of thought may be influenced by the overall theme of the survey or the preceding sequence of survey questions. However, overall, the CSS is relatively consistent in its approach to asking the same social questions each quarter.

Overall life satisfaction has been trending downwards since the summer of 2021

Life satisfaction can be considered a pulse check on Canadians' overall well-being. In the summer of 2021 (Q3 of 2021), when asked to rate how they felt about their lives, over half (54%) of Canadians reported high levels of life satisfaction (8 or higher on the 0-to-10 scale, where 0 means "very dissatisfied" and 10 means "very satisfied"). For comparison, in the summer of 2023 (Q3 of 2023), 50.6% of Canadians rated their life satisfaction highly. This percentage has continued to decline, dropping to 48.6% by the winter of 2024 (Q1).

While there was little difference in high levels of life satisfaction between men and women, there was variation across age groups (Chart 1a). Throughout the period spanning from the summer of 2021 to the winter of 2024, older Canadians consistently reported higher levels of life satisfaction than younger age groups. On average, over 3 in 5 older adults (61.5%) reported high life satisfaction, with no change over the period examined. Conversely, younger Canadians were less likely to report high life satisfaction, and they experienced a decline in life satisfaction. Specifically, among those aged 25 to 34 years old, life satisfaction decreased by over 10 percentage points (47.2% to 36.9%) during the study period – a 3.9 percentage point decline per year.

When examined by region, residents of Quebec consistently reported higher levels of life satisfaction, compared to other regions in Canada. However, declines in life satisfaction were observed across the country, most notably in Atlantic Canada where life satisfaction declined by 3.0 percentage points each year.

In general, Canada's rural population was more likely to report higher and more stable levels of life satisfaction (Chart 1b). In the summer of 2021, nearly 3 in 5 (59.6%) Canadians living in rural areas were satisfied with their lives, compared to 53.0% of Canadians in urban areas. Annually, life satisfaction among rural Canadians decreased at a rate of 0.6 percentage points per year, dropping to 57.3% by the end of the study period. Meanwhile, urban populations saw a steeper decline of 2.1 percentage points each year, falling to 47.2% by the end of the study.

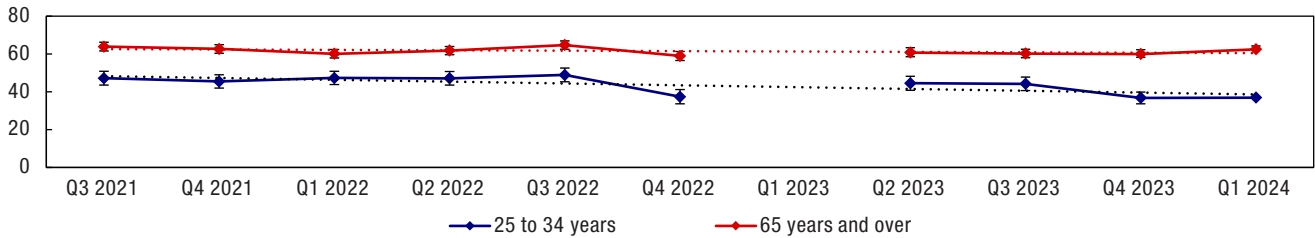
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Chart 1

Percent reporting high life satisfaction, Canadians aged 15 years or older, selected sociodemographic or geographic groups, 2021 to 2024

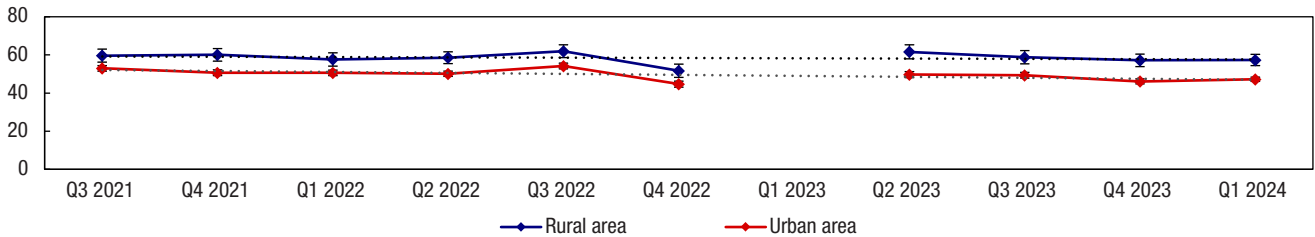
1.1 Selected age groups

percent



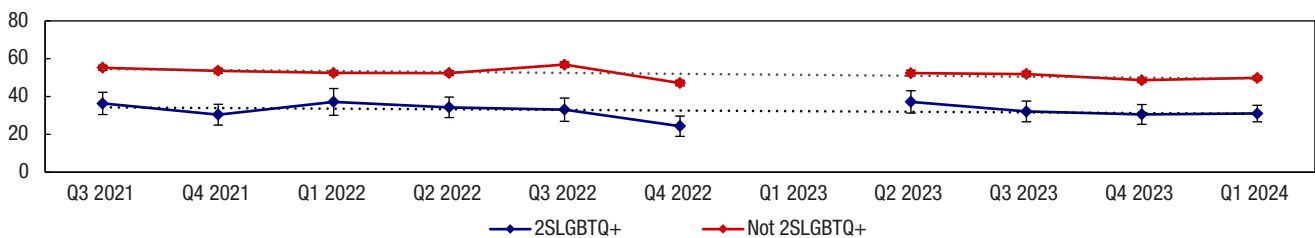
1.2 Place of residence

percent



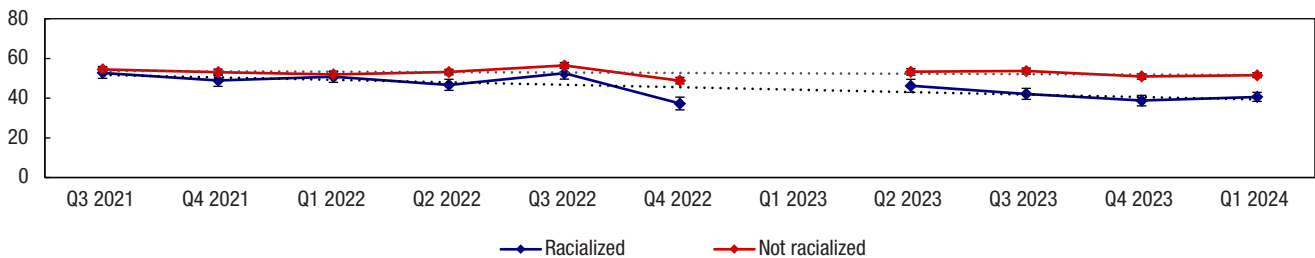
1.3 2SLGBTQ+

percent



1.4 Racialized population

percent



Notes: Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals. 2SLGBTQ+ refer to Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, or those who use other terms related to gender or sexual diversity.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Social Survey, Q3 2021 - Q1 2024 (excluding Q1 2023).

To contextualize this finding, [95% of racialized Canadians lived in one of Canada's large urban centres and urban populations tend to be younger than rural populations](#), both of which are characteristics linked to lower levels of life satisfaction. Other unmeasured differences between rural and urban areas (e.g., commuting distance) may contribute to these observed differences as well.

Some population groups have experienced greater declines in life satisfaction

Indicators of well-being are known to vary across sociodemographic groups. Groups such as the 2SLGBTQ+ population, people who identify as having a disability, and racialized Canadians all report lower levels of life satisfaction. For example, across all waves of the CSS, about one-third (32.6%) of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals—that is, people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, Two-Spirit, or who use other terms related to gender or sexual diversity—reported high levels of life satisfaction. This compares to more than half (52.0%) of individuals outside of this population (Chart 1c). Life satisfaction among 2SLGBTQ+ individuals declined by 1.3 percentage points each year, meanwhile those who are not 2SLGBTQ+ experienced a 2.0 percentage point decline each year. Among the 2SLGBTQ+ population, high levels of life satisfaction are rarest among transgender and non-binary individuals, at 24.1% across the study period.

Compared to other Canadians, persons with a disability reported lower levels of life satisfaction (33.1% versus 53.4%). However, the proportion of persons with a

disability feeling satisfied with their lives consistently hovered around 1 in 3 over the course of several waves of the CSS, meanwhile persons without a disability experienced a 2.1 percentage point decline each year.

Meanwhile, racialized groups experienced a notable decline in life satisfaction. In mid-2021, just over half of racialized (52.7%) and non-racialized Canadians (54.5%) reported high levels of life satisfaction (Chart 1d). Over two years later, non-racialized Canadians experienced a very slight decline in life satisfaction by 0.8 percentage points per year, whereas racialized Canadians reported a 5.0 percentage point drop per year.

Although numerous other factors may contribute to one's self-rated life satisfaction, [those who experienced discrimination or unfair treatment in the previous five years reported lower levels of quality of life](#). On average, over the course of the CSS, over 1 in 3 people (36%) in Canada have experienced some form of discrimination or unfair treatment and among those who experienced discrimination, 37.0% reported high levels of life satisfaction compared to 57.4% of those who did not face discrimination. Discrimination disproportionately affects racialized groups, women, 2SLGBTQ+ populations, persons with a disability and young adults. These are all other factors that could influence subjective measures of well-being.⁵

Financial vulnerability is associated with lower and faster-declining levels of life satisfaction

Another factor associated with life satisfaction is financial well-being. For example, the trend of decreasing life satisfaction was largely driven

by an increase in the proportion of people who reported experiencing financial difficulty, despite an overall increase in incomes.⁶ Over the entire study period, fewer than 3 in 10 people (29%) who reported that it was difficult or very difficult for their household to meet its financial needs in terms of transportation, housing, food, clothing, and other necessary expenses in the previous 12 months had high levels of life satisfaction. Their life satisfaction decreased over the study period, at a rate of 2.1 percentage points per year.

In contrast, among Canadians who reported it was easy or very easy for their household to meet its financial needs, nearly 60% had high levels of life satisfaction. This proportion increased slightly by 0.9 percentage points each year, between Q3 of 2021 and Q1 of 2024 (Chart 2).

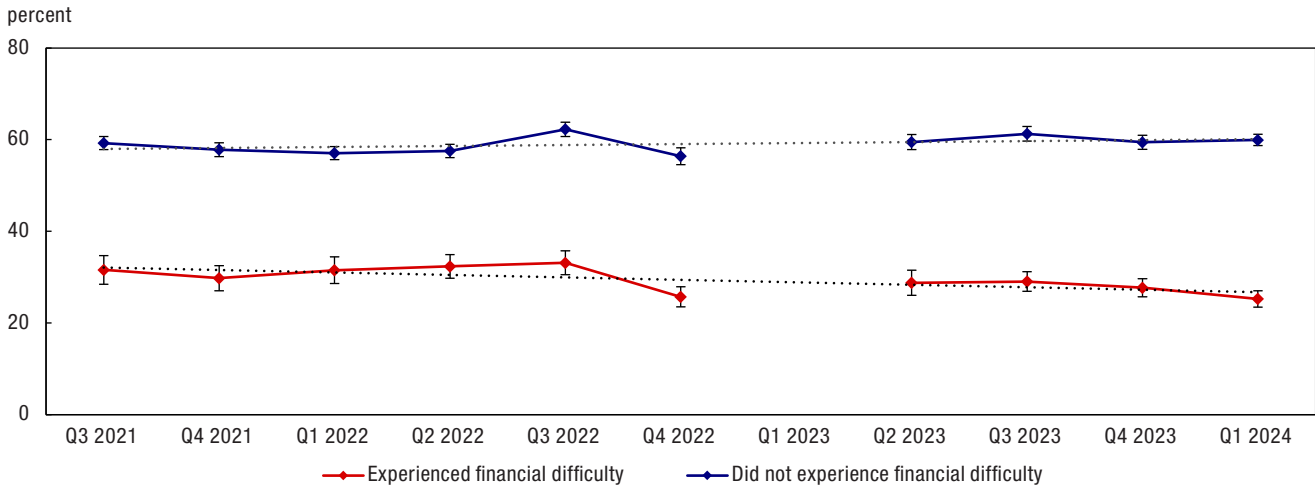
Younger adults, racialized Canadians and persons with disabilities were more likely to report financial difficulty

During the past few years, rising consumer prices have coincided with an increasing proportion of Canadians facing financial challenges. In mid-2021, fewer than 1 in 5 Canadians (18.6%) reported that it was difficult for their household to meet its financial needs in the previous 12 months (Chart 3a). This proportion doubled by Q4 of 2023, peaking at 37.4%. The proportion subsequently dropped to about one-third (32.8%) at the beginning of 2024. Overall, there was an annual 6.7 percentage point increase in Canadians experiencing financial hardship between mid-2021 and the beginning of 2024.

Financial hardship was not experienced uniformly. Canadians aged 25 to 54 were the most likely

Chart 2

Percent reporting high life satisfaction, Canadians aged 15 years or older, by experiences of self-reported financial difficulty, 2021 to 2024



Note: Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.
 Source: Canadian Social Survey, Q3 2021 to Q1 2024 (excluding Q1 2023).

to experience financial hardship, where at the beginning of 2024, 40.0% were finding it difficult to meet their financial needs. This was about 1.5 times higher than Canadians aged 15 to 24 (28.5%) and adults aged 55 and older (25.5%) (Chart 3b). Not only were working-aged adults most likely to be experiencing financial difficulties, but this age group also saw an annual 8.1 percentage point increase in experiences of financial hardship since the summer of 2021. In comparison, Canadians aged 15 to 24 and those 55 years and older saw a 5.6 and 5.3 annual percentage point increase respectively.

The generational disparity in self-reported financial difficulty may be in part, related to housing challenges, which is [the largest household expense](#).⁷ Data from the 2021 Census shows that younger adults spent more of their income on shelter costs than Canadians in older

age groups,⁸ possibly because [older Canadians are more likely to have already purchased and paid off their home](#).⁹ Relatedly, [homeownership rates among younger Canadians have declined](#)¹⁰ in recent years, with [nearly two-thirds of Canadians between the ages of 15 to 29 renting their home in 2021](#).¹¹ Furthermore, in 2022, 32% of youth (aged 15 to 29) said that [they wanted to buy a home or move to a new rental unit but decided against the move because of price concerns](#), highlighting how the rising cost of living is forcing some to make sacrifices.¹²

Rates of financial difficulty were higher among racialized Canadians, and this group reported a faster increase in these challenges over time, compared to non-racialized Canadians. Between Q3 of 2021 and Q1 of 2024, the proportion of racialized Canadians reporting it was difficult for their household to meet its financial needs increased from

21.1% to 37.6% (Chart 3c). This represents an 8.4 percentage point annual increase in financial hardship among racialized Canadians, compared to a 6.1 percentage point annual increase among non-racialized Canadians.

Persons with a disability, difficulty or long-term condition were more likely to encounter financial challenges compared to the rest of the Canadian population. In the summer of 2021, fewer than one-third (30.7%) of persons with a disability reported difficulty for their household to meet its financial needs, which increased to almost half (47.2%) by early 2024. This represented an annual increase of 7.2 percentage points (Chart 3d). Across the same time period, 16.8% of persons without a disability reported experiencing financial hardship in 2021, which nearly doubled to 30.4% by 2024 – a similar-paced annual increase of 6.6 percentage points.

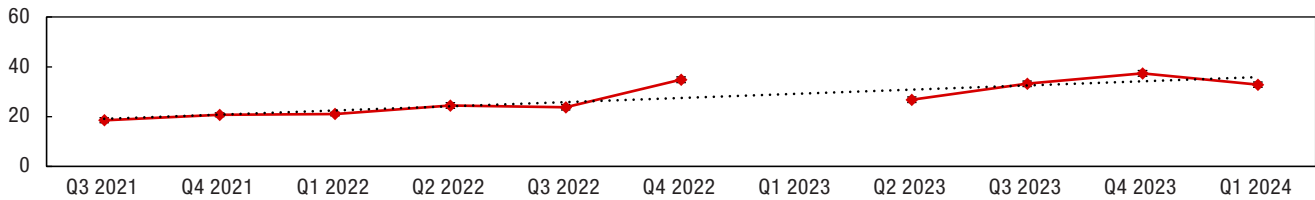
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Chart 3

Percent reporting financial difficulty, Canadians aged 15 years or older, selected sociodemographic or geographic groups, 2021 to 2024

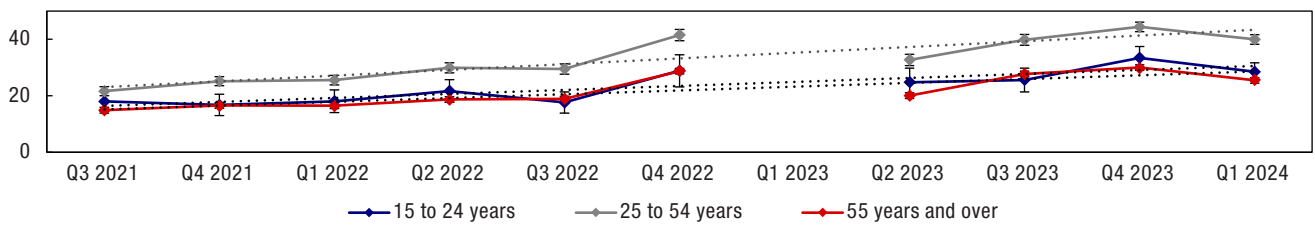
3.1 Total, Canadians aged 15 years and over

percent



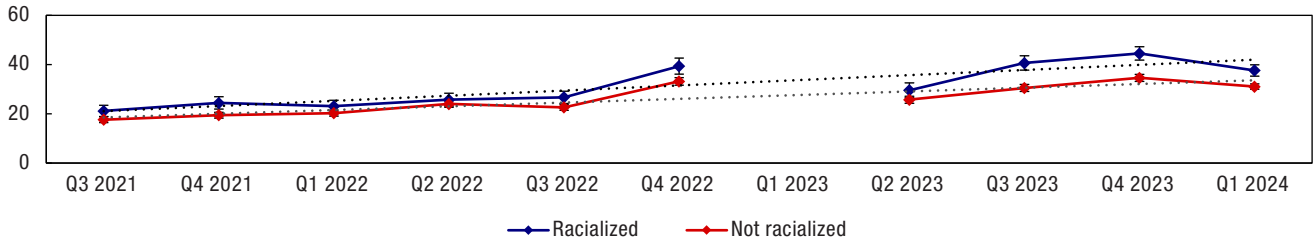
3.2 Selected age groups

percent



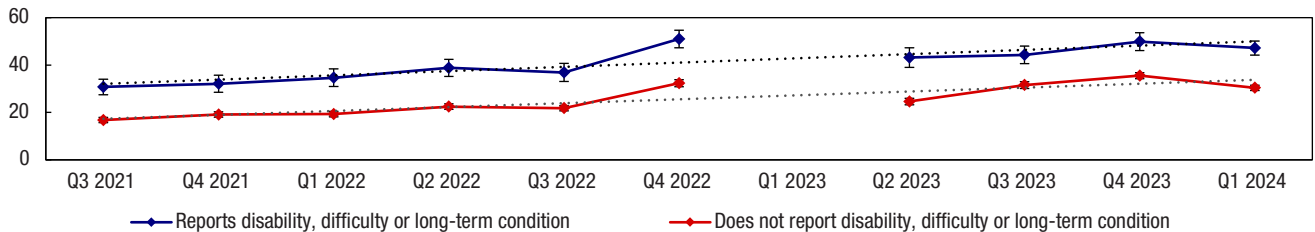
3.3 Racialized population

percent



3.4 Disability status

percent



Note: Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Canadian Social Survey, Q3 2021 to Q1 2024 (excluding Q1 2023).

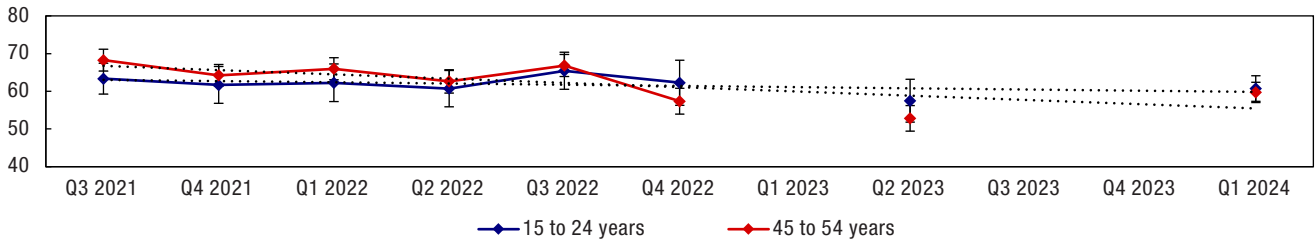
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Chart 4

Percent reporting a hopeful future outlook, Canadians aged 15 to 24 years, 45 to 54 years, 2SLGBTQ+, and racialized, 2021 to 2024

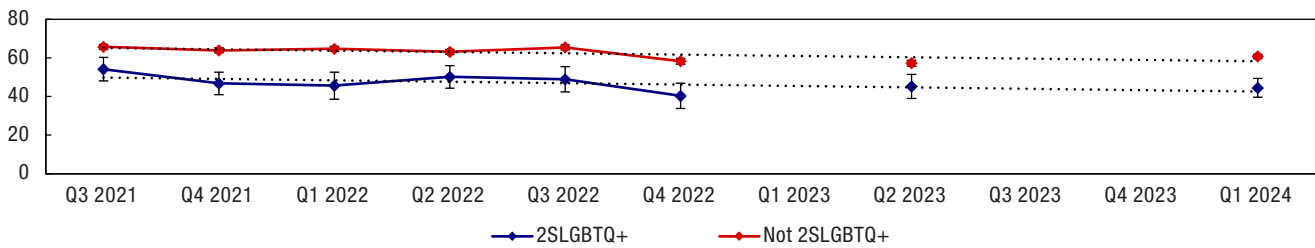
4.1 Selected age groups

percent



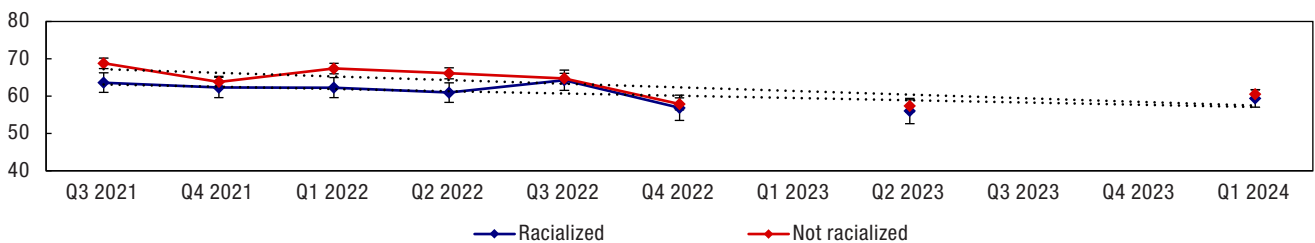
4.2 2SLGBTQ+

percent



4.3 Racialized population

percent



Notes: Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals. 2SLGBTQ+ refer to Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, or those who use other terms related to gender or sexual diversity.

Source: Canadian Social Survey, Q3 2021 to Q1 2024 (excluding Q1, Q3 and Q4 of 2023).

While the reported data present overall trends in financial well-being between different segments of the Canadian population, these results do not consider disparities across various geographies or other population characteristics.

Hopeful feelings about the future are declining – and this decline is more prevalent among middle-aged adults, 2SLGBTQ+ people, and racialized men

In the summer of 2021, nearly two-thirds (65%) of Canadians reported “always” or “often” having a hopeful

view of the future, but by early 2024, this proportion had declined to 59.7%. Although women generally held a slightly more positive outlook than men (62.7% versus 60.1%), hopefulness among both women and men declined at the same rate over time – by about 2.8% percentage points annually.

In 2024, Canadians of all ages were feeling less hopeful about the future than they were in 2021. However, this decline was most pronounced among those aged 45 to 54 years. Specifically, in the summer of 2021, 68.3% of 45 to 54-year-olds reported a positive view of the future, the highest proportion across all age groups. By early 2024, this proportion fell to 59.7%, representing a 4.5 percentage point annual decrease in hopefulness among this group. In comparison, younger Canadians aged 15 to 24 reporting a positive future outlook decreased by 1.3 percentage points annually over the same period (Chart 4a).

Some groups have below-average levels of hopefulness, and have experienced greater declines over time. For example, the proportion of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals reporting a positive future outlook fell from 54.1% to 44.5% between Q3 of 2021 and Q1 of 2024. In comparison, nearly two-thirds of non-2SLGBTQ+ individuals (65.7%) initially reported feeling hopeful about the future, which declined to 60.8% over the same period (Chart 4b).

The [2SLGBTQ+ population is also more likely to report having fair or poor mental health, to be violently victimized, or to seriously contemplate suicide during their lifetimes compared to non-2SLGBTQ+ individuals](#),¹³ all of which could contribute to a less hopeful view of the future for this group. Despite these challenges, this population reported being well-supported with more than 7 in 10 (72.2% in Q1 of 2024) 2SLGBTQ+ individuals always or

often having people they could depend on to help when they really need it.

Notably, in the summer of 2021, racialized men reported higher levels of hopefulness (71.3%) compared to racialized women (66.2%) and non-racialized Canadians (63.6%). However, over the course of the CSS, the proportion of racialized men reporting a hopeful view of the future fell to 60.4%.

A number of factors could have contributed to the decline in hopefulness among marginalized groups, for example, [challenging social situations—such as experiences of discrimination—are associated with lower levels of hopefulness](#).¹⁴ One's level of financial stability may also impact their future outlook; for example, [in 2021/2022 those who were employed were more likely to be hopeful about the future than those who were looking for paid work the week prior \(66% vs. 51%\)](#).¹⁵ This is aligned with data from numerous waves of the CSS which found that among those who did not experience financial difficulty, more than 2 in 3 (67.1%) reported a hopeful outlook, compared to less than half (45.0%) of those who faced financial hardship.

This relationship between financial stability and hopefulness may suggest future challenges for marginalized populations such as [racialized groups, Indigenous peoples, people with a disability, and recent immigrants among other groups who are more often living below the poverty line](#).¹⁶ Rising costs and other financial obstacles could affect the future opportunities and potentially the future outlook among vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

In the past few years, Canadians have had to adapt to changing socioeconomic contexts. This article examines selected Quality of Life indicators such as life satisfaction, financial well-being, and future outlook, to better understand how the subjective well-being of Canadians has changed over recent years.

The time-series approach demonstrates how some sociodemographic groups experienced more notable declines in life satisfaction and hopefulness than others, as well as increases in financial hardship. The data suggest a relationship between financial well-being and overall well-being. The collection of Quality of Life data at regular intervals allows for the identification and analysis of inequalities across a range of dimensions over time. These indicators of well-being can then be used to inform policy efforts to support vulnerable groups throughout rapidly changing and challenging socioeconomic times. Moving forward, in the context of slowing inflation, Statistics Canada will continue to monitor future trends to identify any potential shifts in life satisfaction, future outlook, financial well-being and other Quality of Life indicators. Indeed, there are early signs that future outlook may be improving, though only through repeated and regular monitoring will it be possible to confirm an upward trend in this well-being indicator.

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Data source, limitations and definitions

Data sources

The time-series data used in this article are from the [Canadian Social Survey \(CSS\)](#), using waves collected between April 2021 to March 2024. The CSS is a voluntary, cross-sectional, quarterly survey that collects information on well-being, health, time use, confidence in institutions, and other social issues. The target population for the CSS is all non-institutionalized persons aged 15 or older, living off-reserve within the 10 provinces of Canada. Exclusions represent fewer than 2% of the Canadian population aged 15 and older. The response rate for each cycle varied between 43.3% and 58.9%, with a stratified sample of approximately 20,000 dwellings selected probabilistically.

Population-level estimates in the time series were determined using survey and bootstrap weights, to reflect the underlying population of Canada. When appropriate, a linear correlation model was determined for time series, to provide an estimate of annual change for some indicators.

Definitions

Canadians: Refers to all people living in Canada, regardless of citizenship status.

Transgender and non-binary individuals: Persons whose sex assigned at birth does not correspond to their current gender.

Persons with a disability, difficulty or long-term condition: Respondents who self-identified as a person with a disability.

High levels of life satisfaction: 8, 9 or 10 on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means “Very dissatisfied” and 10 means “Very satisfied” when asked “how do you feel about your life as a whole right now?”

Individuals are considered **hopeful about the future** if they respond always or often to the following question: “Thinking about your life in general, how often would you say you have a hopeful view of the future?”.

Individuals are considered to be **experiencing financial difficulty** if they reported that it was “difficult” or “very difficult” for their household to meet its financial needs in terms of transportation, housing, food, clothing, and other necessary expenses in the past 12 months.

Limitations

Survey framing effects can impact the distribution of responses related to well-being on the Canadian Social Survey. When looking at quality of life and well-being indicators over time, it is important to consider the potential framing effects of the survey content. Survey framing refers to how the respondent’s line of thought may be influenced by the overall theme of the survey or the preceding sequence of survey questions.¹⁷

For example, [a recent study found that the changes in the survey theme between iterations of the General Social Survey accounted for a significant portion of the year-over-year variations in life satisfaction responses as the theme changed the frame of mind in which respondents answered this question](#). Similar impacts are observed on the 7th wave of the Canadian Social Survey. Collection took place during Q4 of 2022 and the topic of this survey was “Quality of Life and Cost of Living”, which featured additional questions about financial well-being and the impacts of rising prices. Notably, during this wave, the proportion of respondents reporting financial difficulty was higher than average (34.8% vs. 27.5%). Meanwhile, the proportion of respondents reporting high levels of life satisfaction (45.7% vs. 50.1%) and a positive future outlook (57.2% vs. 61.4%) were lower than average.

This demonstrates how survey framing likely influenced the ways in which respondents answered subjective questions about their well-being and thus can lead to variability in reported well-being across different survey waves. For this reason, it is useful to examine trends over time in order to gauge if well-being is generally improving or worsening.

Relatedly, there is a potential for seasonal influences in how respondents answered survey questions and these data were not adjusted for seasonality.

Notes

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