

Data on people's self-reported 'experienced' well-being could help inform policies

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Gathering survey data on "experienced" well-being – the self-reported levels of contentment, joy, stress, frustration, and other feelings people experience throughout the day and while engaged in various activities—would be valuable to inform policies, says a new report from the National Research Council. In particular, data on specific actions intended to improve the living and working conditions of different population groups, including children or older adults, show promise in developing policies and practices in such areas as end of life care, commuting, child custody laws, and city planning, to name a few.

"The most compelling case for gathering data on experienced well-being is to identify particular populations that are suffering and to shed light on ways to alleviate that suffering," said Arthur Stone, chair of the committee that wrote the report and distinguished professor of psychiatry and psychology at Stony Brook University. Yet, because some methodological issues still need to be resolved, he noted, questions that gauge experienced well-being should initially be included in government surveys on an experimental or pilot basis.

The report was requested by the U.S. National Institute on Aging and the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council, which asked the National Research Council to assess whether measuring experienced well-being has value for informing policy. Interest in measuring self-reported or "subjective" well-being has grown in recent years, as some policymakers and researchers have doubted whether traditional economic measures, such as gross domestic product, can by themselves adequately reflect the

quality of life of a population or country. However, the committee that wrote the report expressed skepticism about the current usefulness of aggregating data on self-reported well-being into a single number meant to track an average happiness level of an entire population.

The report focuses on experienced well-being—moment-to-moment, hour-to-hour, and day-to-day feelings of pleasure, contentment, anxiety, pain, etc. – but it cautions that well-informed policy decisions also need to consider other "evaluative" and "eudaimonic" aspects of self-reported well-being. Evaluative well-being reflects a person's assessment of his or her overall life satisfaction. Eudaimonic well-being refers to a person's perceptions of purpose, and the meaningfulness (or pointlessness) of the activities he or she is engaged in and of overall life quality. An activity can rate highly in one area and low in another. For example, time caring for children is typically reported as being more meaningful than pleasurable; in contrast, the opposite is true for other activities, such as watching television.

Which aspects of subjective well-being are most relevant and important to measure depend on the policy question to be addressed, the report says. For example, in studies of housing conditions or patient outcomes associated with medical treatment, moment-to-moment measures of both emotions and sensations such as pain, cold, or fear may be especially relevant. Using methods that capture details on activities and time use—what activities respondents were engaged in when they felt a certain way – often enhances the policy relevance of data on experienced well-being, the report says.

Several government and private surveys already include questions on experienced well-being, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey. The report identifies many more specialized government surveys – such as the American Housing Survey and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics – that are candidates for

inclusion of experienced well-being questions. Questions could also be considered for inclusion on a pilot basis in the broader [population](#) surveys of the federal statistical agencies, as they have been in the U.K.

Provided by National Academy of Sciences

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