Thriving Together in America

Trends, Discoveries, Community Action and Advice for Leaders

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Introduction

Americans' assessments of their lives have changed significantly over the past two decades. After improving in the years following the Great Recession, wellbeing plunged at the onset of COVID-19, only to reach an all-time high in June 2021 amid widespread vaccinations and economic reopening. Since then, national wellbeing has once again declined, nearing the lows recorded during the Great Recession and the early months of the pandemic. Longstanding patterns across age, race and other demographic groups have also changed, revealing shifts in who experiences wellbeing. There is also wide variation in wellbeing across communities, raising important questions about why some people and places are thriving while others are struggling or suffering.

This report examines those questions through the lens of Gallup's Life Evaluation Index, one of the most widely used measures of subjective wellbeing in the world. The index is based on two questions from the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale that ask people to evaluate their lives today and anticipate where they expect their lives to be five years from now. Together, these responses provide a simple but powerful way to understand how people experience their lives and to classify them as thriving (high wellbeing), struggling (inconsistent wellbeing) or suffering (low wellbeing).

Over two decades, Gallup has tracked these measures across the United States and in more than 150 countries worldwide. That record now includes more than 3.1 million interviews in the U.S. alone, spanning periods of economic growth, recession, social disruption and recovery. The resulting data provide a unique opportunity to examine long-term trends in wellbeing, identify factors associated with thriving, and better understand the conditions that influence how people think about and evaluate their lives.

The first section of this report reviews the science of life evaluation. Drawing on Gallup research and a broader body of scholarly literature, it examines what life evaluation measures, how it relates to health, financial security, social connection and hope, and what recent trends reveal about the state of wellbeing in America.

The second section examines how communities are using wellbeing data to inform local action. Across the country, community organizations, health systems, local governments, philanthropic institutions and civic leaders are increasingly incorporating wellbeing measures into planning and decision-making. Their experiences illustrate how data can be used to better understand community needs, align efforts across sectors and track progress over time.

The report concludes with lessons for leaders. Improving wellbeing requires more than measurement. Leaders must also understand the conditions that support thriving, recognize where challenges are greatest, and make informed decisions about where to focus attention and resources. By combining evidence with examples from practice, this report aims to contribute to a growing conversation about how communities can create the conditions that help more people thrive.

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How Is the Gallup Life Evaluation Index Calculated?

Gallup's Life Evaluation Index: Two Questions and Three Groups

The Gallup Life Evaluation Index is based on two questions from the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale:

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you.

1) *On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?*
2) *On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now?*

The first question represents someone's current life evaluation, while the second represents their anticipated life evaluation.

Responses for the two items are sorted into one of three groups: thriving, struggling or suffering.

Thriving respondents report positive views of their present lives (7+) and optimistic views for the next five years (8+). Suffering respondents report poor ratings in their current lives (4 or lower) and negative views of the next five years (4 or lower). All other respondents are categorized as struggling, including those who rate their current lives well but their future lives less so, or vice versa.

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Executive Summary

Wellbeing in America Has Declined Significantly Since 2021

Americans' evaluations of their lives have deteriorated in recent years. Through the third quarter of 2026, 48.1% of U.S. adults were classified as thriving according to Gallup's Life Evaluation Index, down more than 10 percentage points from the post-pandemic peak reached exactly five years earlier. The decline places national wellbeing near record lows observed only during the Great Recession and the earliest months of the COVID-19 pandemic since Gallup began tracking the measure in 2008.

The worsening of wellbeing extends beyond declining thriving rates. The percentage of Americans classified as suffering rose to 5.1% in 2025, representing an estimated 14 million adults and one of the highest readings observed since Gallup began tracking. Through the third quarter of 2026, suffering remained elevated at 4.6%. Together, these trends suggest that wellbeing challenges are affecting a growing share of the population and are more deeply rooted than simply the effects of short-term external shocks.

The Decline Is Not Evenly Distributed

The overall erosion in wellbeing nationally has not affected all groups equally. Young adults have experienced the most dramatic change. In 2010, adults aged 18 to 29 reported the highest thriving rate (64%) of any age group. Through the third quarter of 2026, they reported the lowest (44%). This 20-point decline represents the largest shift in wellbeing recorded across age groups over the duration of the index, and has been accompanied by a sharp increase in clinical depression and very high levels of loneliness among young adults in recent years (Witters, 2026b).

Patterns have also changed across major racial and ethnic groups, among which meaningful differences have historically existed in thriving rates. Today, Black, Hispanic, White and Asian American adults report remarkably similar levels of thriving. While convergence might ordinarily be viewed as a positive, in this case it reflects broader patterns of deterioration rather than improvement. All four groups are lower in thriving today than in 2021.

Geographic variation remains substantial as well. Even when the national average appears stable, thriving rates differ dramatically across communities. Some counties report thriving rates approaching 70%, while others remain near or below 40%, highlighting the extent to which local conditions shape how people evaluate their lives.

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Future Optimism Has Reached Record Lows

One of the most notable findings is the sharp decline in Americans' expectations for their futures. Gallup's measure of anticipated life evaluation, based on the percentage of adults who believe they will have a highly satisfying life five years from now, fell to a record low in 2025.

Historically, Americans have tended to view their futures more positively than their present circumstances. Recent trends indicate that this relationship is changing. Future life ratings have deteriorated more rapidly than current life ratings, creating a widening gap between present conditions and future expectations. Research suggests that this forward-looking dimension of wellbeing is closely connected to hope, perceived opportunity and belief in a better future.

What Research Reveals About Thriving

Nearly two decades of Gallup research and the broader academic literature point to several consistent findings about the factors associated with higher life evaluation.

People who evaluate their lives positively are more likely to report better physical health, stronger financial security, more meaningful social relationships, regular use of their natural strengths and a greater sense of purpose. Income is strongly associated with life evaluation across individuals, communities, states and countries. This indicates that adults with higher incomes tend to be thriving at higher rates. However, substantial variation in thriving exists among individuals within any given income band, underscoring how many factors independent of wealth can shape a thriving life. Community-level conditions also matter: Financial shocks, declining social trust, weak support systems and diminished optimism about the future are all associated with lower wellbeing.

Collectively, these findings suggest that thriving reflects far more than economic circumstances alone. Life evaluation serves as a summary assessment that incorporates health, financial conditions, relationships, meaning, opportunity and future expectations into a single measure of how people rate their lives.

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Communities Use Wellbeing Data to Guide Action

Across the U.S., communities are increasingly using wellbeing measures to better understand local conditions and inform decision-making. Community organizations, health systems, local governments, philanthropic institutions and civic leaders are incorporating life evaluation and related measures into planning, community assessments and improvement initiatives.

The examples in this report show how wellbeing data can help communities identify priorities, align efforts across sectors, evaluate progress and strengthen conditions associated with thriving. While approaches differ from place to place, many communities are now interested in measuring not only economic performance or social determinants of health, but also how residents think about and evaluate their lives across an array of indicators associated with thriving.

Lessons for Leaders

The findings in this report also point to three practical lessons for leaders:

1) Wellbeing can be scientifically measured consistently and meaningfully over time.
2) Changes in wellbeing often reveal important developments before they appear in traditional economic or institutional indicators.
3) Thriving is influenced by a combination of personal, social, economic and community conditions, highlighting the need for coordinated responses rather than isolated interventions.

Finally, improving community wellbeing requires more than tracking outcomes. It requires understanding the conditions that support thriving, identifying where challenges and opportunities are greatest, recognizing that the needs of one area may vary from those of the next, and using evidence to guide decisions. When residents and leaders work together to both measure wellbeing and organize sustained action, they are better positioned to monitor progress, learn from experience and create communities where more people thrive.

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State of the Science

Why Life Evaluation Is a Useful Measure of Progress

For decades, economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP) have served as shorthand for whether people's lives are improving. While these measures provide important information, they do not directly capture how people experience their lives. Two communities can have similar economic profiles while exhibiting very different levels of wellbeing, optimism and quality of life.

As a result, researchers, policymakers and community leaders have increasingly sought measures that complement traditional economic indicators with information about people's lived experiences (Liu et al., 2024). Numerous reports and studies focused on wellbeing have emerged, including the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2026), the Social Progress Index (Social Progress Imperative, 2026), the Global Flourishing Study (2026), the Belonging Barometer (American Immigration Council, 2024) and the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (2026). These efforts reflect a growing recognition that economic performance alone does not fully explain whether people are thriving.

Gallup's Life Evaluation Index offers one of the simplest and most widely used measures of wellbeing. It is easy to administer, straightforward to interpret, and accessible to both researchers and community audiences. The index is also supported by an extensive evidence base. Gallup has tracked life evaluation continuously in the U.S. since 2008 and internationally since 2005 through the Gallup World Poll. More than 3.1 million interviews have been conducted in the U.S. alone, creating a long-term record that spans economic expansion, recession, pandemic disruption and recovery.

Research has consistently shown that life evaluation is strongly associated with outcomes that matter to individuals, communities and institutions. Places with higher wellbeing tend to have more vibrant local economies (Fioroni, 2026), lower new healthcare costs (Witters & Agrawal, 2023), higher productivity (Harter & Pendell, 2025), longer lives (Arora et al., 2016), more active civic participation (English & Ray, 2011), and greater resilience in the face of crisis and mental health difficulty (James & Witters, 2024). Because life evaluation is related to a wide range of factors, it functions as a useful summary measure of how people experience their lives overall.

The measure's value extends beyond research. Its classifications — thriving, struggling and suffering (Page 2) — are easily understood by broad audiences and provide a common language for discussing wellbeing. For communities seeking to understand local conditions and track progress over time, the measure offers both scientific rigor and practical accessibility.

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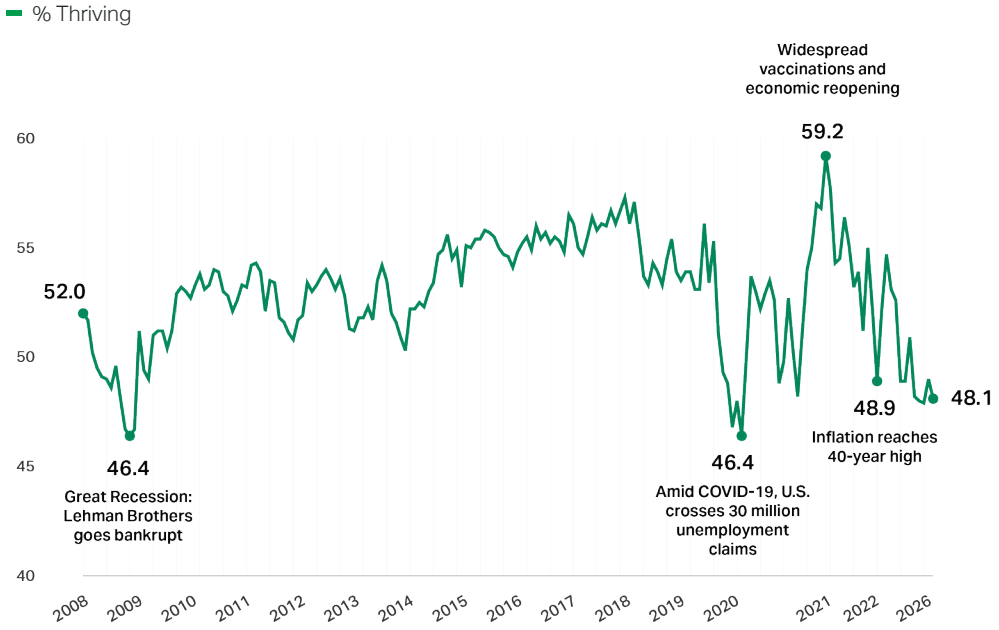
Long-Term Trends Reveal a Metric That Is Both Responsive to Major Events and Unequal Across Groups

Through the third quarter of 2026, the percentage of American adults who rated both their current and future lives high enough to be classified as thriving dropped to 48.1%. This percentage is down over 10 points from the 59.2% high mark reached in June 2021, six months after the COVID-19 vaccine first began public distribution. The final 2025 estimate is the sixth-lowest value of 178 (primarily monthly or quarterly) measurement periods dating back to January 2008. Lower values have only been recorded during the Great Recession (October, November and December of 2008) and the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020). The rate has changed little across the first three measurement periods of 2026.

CHART 1

Life Evaluation, U.S. Adults (2008-2026)

After reaching a record high in June 2021, thriving percentage loses over 10 points by third quarter of 2026



The line chart represents 179 field periods beginning January 2008. The asymmetrical spacing of the years along the x-axis is due to inconsistent durations of the field periods over the course of the nearly 19 years of measurement, with particularly frequent measurement periods during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

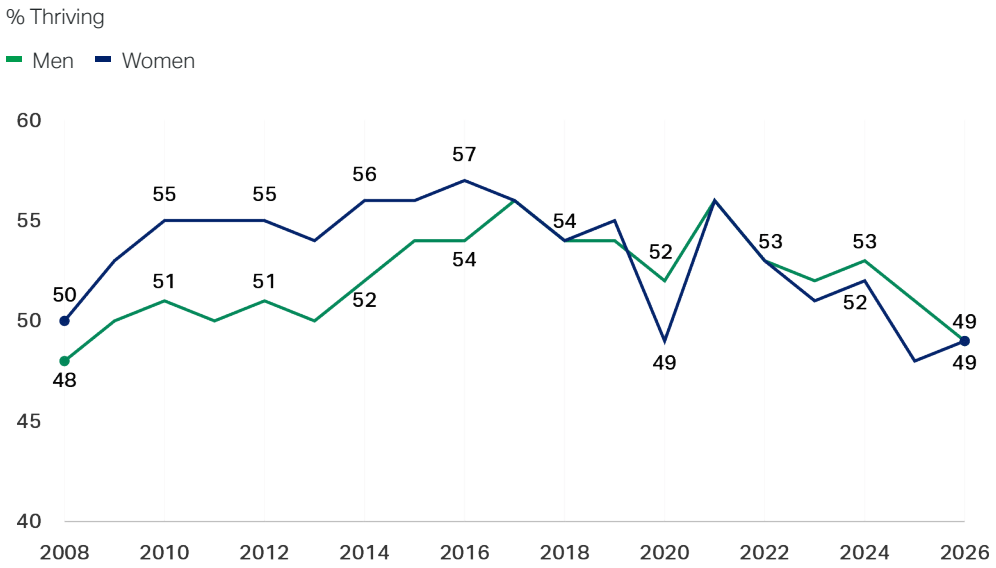
Examining the principal drivers of change in any given period can be instructive. For example, the declines in life evaluation ratings coincide with changes in two metrics measured as part of the broader Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index™, both of which have worsened since mid-2024. One is not worrying about money in the prior seven days, which has shown a 7-point decline in agreement coupled with a similar increase in disagreement. The other is having a leader who creates enthusiasm for the future, which has shown a nearly 4-point drop in agreement alongside a 5-point increase in disagreement.

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The trend lines among key demographic subgroups provide additional insights. For example, from 2008 to 2017, the thriving rate was consistently higher among women than men and generally improved for both men and women before edging downward for both groups by 2018. In 2020 — the first year of the pandemic — thriving among men fell 2 points amid a much larger decline among women (down 6 points to 49%). Although trends rebounded in 2021, thriving rates have declined for both groups in recent years. Since 2020, the thriving rate among men has matched or exceeded that of women, an inversion of the pattern seen for the first 10 years of measurement.

CHART 2

Life Evaluation by Gender (2008-2026)



Thriving categorization requires "7" or higher to current life AND "8" or higher to future life in five years. Scale is truncated for visual clarity. The full scale of thriving ranges from 0-100%.

Life Ratings of Young Adults Have Declined Significantly Since 2010

Thriving rates have fluctuated across age groups from 2008 to 2026. Among U.S. adults aged 18 to 29, thriving peaked in 2010 at 64%. Since then, the rate has steadily eroded, including a particularly large decline in 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the third quarter of 2026, just 44% of adults aged 18 to 29 were thriving, marking a 20-point decline over 16 years. During that same period, young adults went from having the highest rate of thriving among the four major age groups to the lowest.

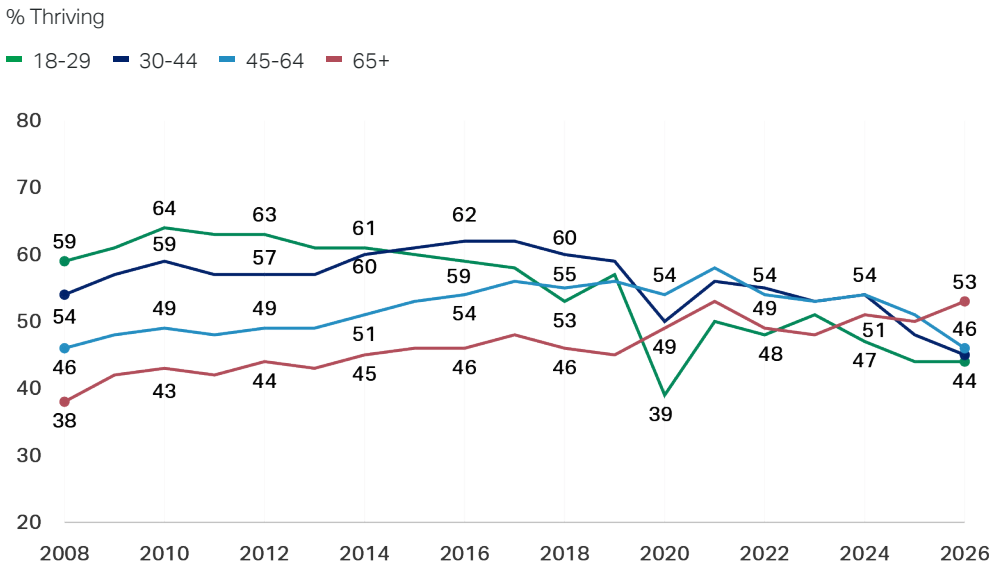
Adults aged 30 to 44 have followed a similar but less pronounced pattern in thriving over a shorter period. Their thriving rate increased steadily until 2016, when they hit their peak of 62%. Since then, the rate has declined. Just 45% of adults aged 30 to 44 were thriving in late 2026.

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Middle-aged and older adults experienced different trends in thriving. Just 46% of adults aged 45 to 64 were thriving in 2008. The rate for this group steadily increased, reaching 58% in 2021 before falling to 46% thus far in 2026, and is on track to match the previous annual low of 46%, last measured at the onset of the Great Recession in 2008. Likewise, just 38% of adults 65 and older were thriving in 2008. Following a steady increase, this rate peaked in 2021 at 53%. Despite some declines in recent years, the rate of thriving among adults 65 and older has hovered around 50% since the pandemic, showing the greatest resilience among the four age groups during this period.

CHART 3

Life Evaluation by Age (2008-2026)



Thriving categorization requires "7" or higher to current life AND "8" or higher to future life in five years. Scale is truncated for visual clarity. The full scale of thriving ranges from 0-100%.

Racial and Ethnic Groups Characterized by Convergence in Thriving Rates Since COVID-19

Of all racial and ethnic groups, Asian Americans experienced the greatest fluctuation in thriving rates from 2008 to 2026. Asian Americans reached their peak thriving rate of 64% in 2010 — the highest rate recorded for any racial or ethnic group. They also maintained the highest thriving rate of any group for the first 11 years of measurement. But by 2020, they had experienced the largest drop in thriving, plunging to 42% amid the COVID-19 pandemic and associated anti-Asian racism encountered by many in the U.S. (Ruiz et al., 2023). Post-pandemic, Asian American thriving rebounded until 2024, when 59% were thriving, before joining all groups in decline in 2025 and 2026.

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Black, Hispanic and White Americans have followed similar trends over the years. In 2008, 47% of Black Americans and 49% of Hispanic and White Americans were thriving. Thriving rates increased among Black adults and more modestly among Hispanic adults through 2012.

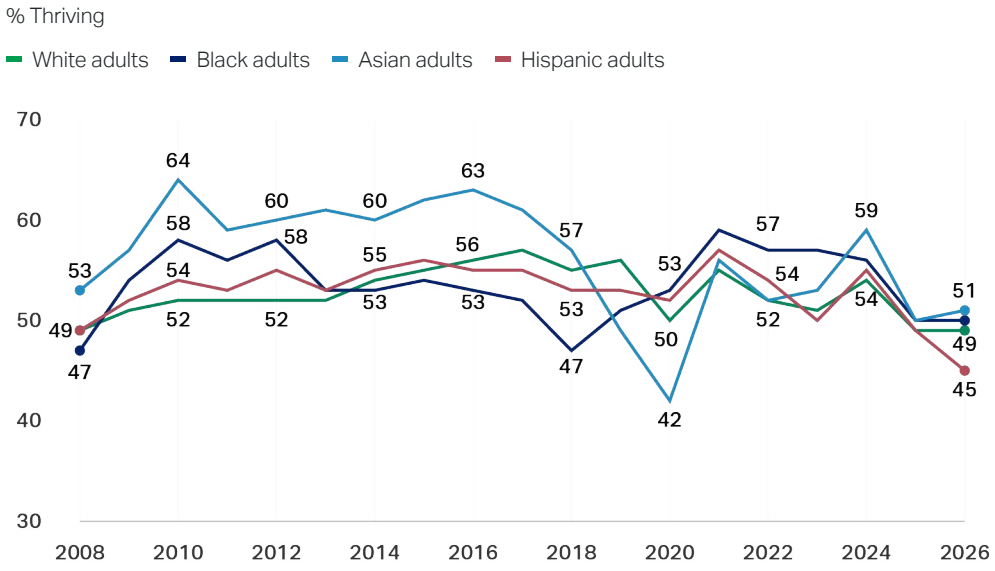
The thriving rate for White Americans remained relatively stable through 2013 before climbing to a high of 57% in 2017. While the thriving rate among Hispanic adults changed little from 2013 to 2018 (from 53% to 56%), the rate among Black Americans declined from 58% to 47% during this period, hitting its lowest point since 2008 during the second year of the first Trump administration (Witters, 2020).

Between 2018 and 2021, thriving rates increased among Black and Hispanic Americans, each hitting a record high (59% for Black Americans and 57% for Hispanic Americans) amid widespread vaccine rollouts and economic reopening, before subsequently declining. Meanwhile, the thriving rate for White Americans increased from its 2020 low of 50%, but did not recover to the same extent as Black and Hispanic Americans.

By 2025 and on through late 2026, all four groups reported similar thriving rates of around 50%, a historically rare convergence that reflects the languishing rate among all adults.

CHART 4

Life Evaluation by Race/Ethnicity (2008-2026)



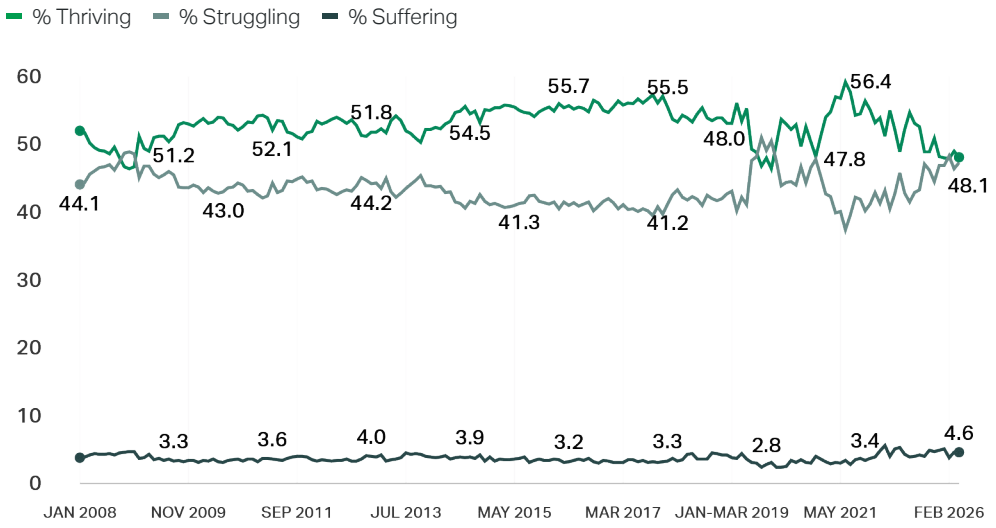
Thriving categorization requires "7" or higher to current life AND "8" or higher to future life in five years. Scale is truncated for visual clarity. The full scale of thriving ranges from 0-100%.

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A more nuanced picture emerges when struggling and suffering rates are examined alongside thriving. Those who are suffering are much more likely to experience greater disease burden, poor mental health and lack of access to basic necessities (Gallup-Healthways, 2009). Historically, the suffering rate has stayed within a narrow range of 3.0% to 4.0%, with a few exceptions such as the Great Recession (Witters & Agrawal, 2022). In recent years, however, it is increasingly elevated. Through the third quarter of 2026, it was at 4.6%, representing an estimated 12.6 million U.S. adults. While the overall erosion of the thriving rate primarily reflects a larger share of Americans categorized as struggling, there is also a noteworthy increase in those categorized as suffering, signaling increasingly distressed lives for millions of Americans.

CHART 5

Thriving, Struggling and Suffering (2008-2026)



Thriving categorization requires "7" or higher to current life AND "8" or higher to future life in five years. Scale is truncated for visual clarity. The full scale of thriving ranges from 0-100%.

Overall, these findings highlight why life evaluation is such a valuable summary metric. It integrates indicators from multiple domains — health, economics, behavior and social context — into a single, intuitive measure. While national trends may suggest an overall decline in thriving, with several groups below 50% in recent measurement periods, variation among different subgroups reveals persistent inequities in wellbeing and opportunity. Rather than replacing traditional indicators, life evaluation complements them by capturing how people experience their lives as a whole. It serves as a higher-order outcome in its own right rather than merely correlating with other metrics.

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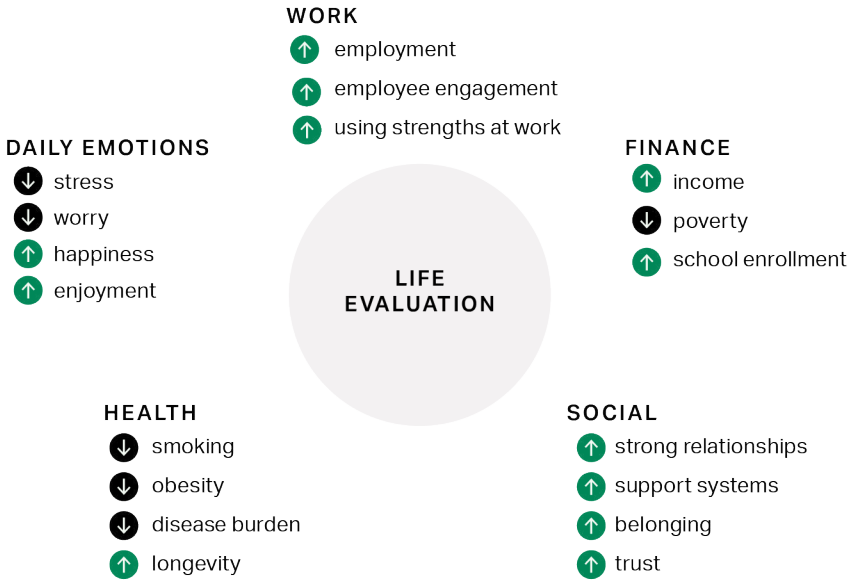
The Functional Drivers of Life Evaluation

Across a wide range of outcomes, life evaluation shows a remarkably consistent pattern: People who rate their lives more positively are also living in environments — and engaging in behaviors — that support better health, greater financial stability and stronger social functioning. Across the U.S., higher life evaluation is strongly associated with lower rates of smoking, obesity and chronic disease. It is also positively associated with life expectancy (Arora et al., 2016), is linked to fewer deaths from heart disease (Spatz et al., 2023) and cancer (Gallup-Healthways, 2009), and is negatively associated with physical disability (Gallup-Healthways, 2009). Daily emotional experiences also help inform how people think about and evaluate their lives. Those who experience a lot of stress and worry on any given day are less likely to rate their lives highly, while those who experience a lot of happiness and enjoyment are more likely to do so (Gallup-Healthways, 2009). These relationships suggest that life evaluation is not simply a reflection of how people feel. It is deeply intertwined with the opportunities and obstacles that affect how people live.

Economic conditions also play a central role in how people perceive their lives. U.S. states with higher life evaluation tend to have higher household incomes, lower poverty rates, lower reliance on food assistance and lower unemployment rates. At the same time, life evaluation is negatively associated with structural risk factors such as economic insecurity and older populations.[1] This reinforces an important finding: Thriving is not evenly distributed across all Americans, and differences in opportunity, financial stability and age are closely linked to how people evaluate their lives both today and in the future.

FIGURE 1

Life Evaluation Relates Positively or Negatively to a Wide Array of Factors



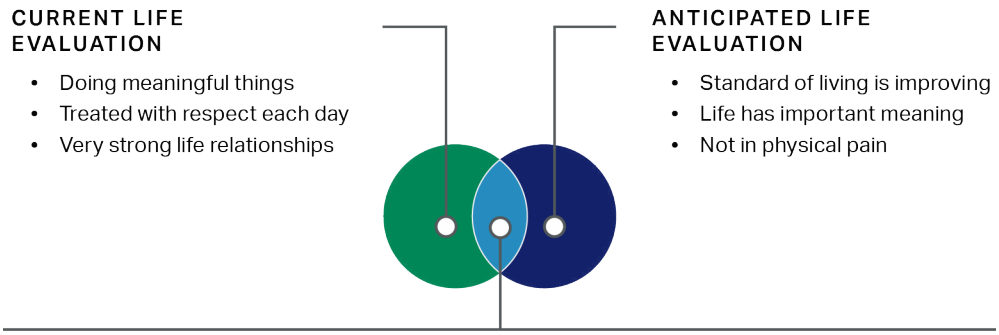
1 Reports of anticipated life evaluation in five years begin to erode among those aged 65 and older, even as current life evaluation improves, reducing the thriving rate that depends on both variables.

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Looking more broadly across item-level correlations, a consistent set of themes emerges for current life evaluation and anticipated life evaluation. The strongest relationships relevant to both tend to cluster around three domains: liking your life (and using your natural strengths), physical health and financial security. There are also aspects of wellbeing that are more uniquely related to either current or anticipated life evaluation. Current life evaluation has additional unique drivers of doing meaningful things in life, being treated with respect on a day-to-day basis and having strong personal relationships. Anticipated life evaluation (i.e., life ratings in five years) is uniquely associated with feeling that your standard of living is improving, that your life has important meaning and purpose, and that you are free of physical pain. Together, current and anticipated life evaluation capture both present conditions and future expectations, offering comprehensive insight into human wellbeing.

FIGURE 2

Some Aspects of Wellbeing Influence Both Ladder Items, While Some Are Unique to One



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Life Evaluation Is Linked to Many Business Outcomes

Life evaluation is also relevant in the workplace. Extensive meta-analyses (e.g., Judge & Watanabe, 1993; Bowling et al., 2010) have confirmed the relationship between current life evaluation and critical work and life outcomes. Included among these outcomes are career satisfaction (measured as cumulative assessments of one's overall accomplishments, skill development and income expectations), job performance (measured by indicators of productivity, including absenteeism), organizational commitment (measured by intent to stay and external ambassadorship), and (inversely) turnover intentions (Erdogan et al., 2012).

TABLE 1

Meta-Analyses of the Relationship Among Life Evaluation, Career Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment, Performance and Turnover Intentions

Correlate	*N*	Mean *r*	*SD(r)*	95% Confidence Interval	*k*
Career satisfaction	3,021	.43	.08	.39, .45	9
Job performance	2,269	.14	.10	.09, .18	10
Organizational commitment	8,588	.30	.09	.28, .32	10
Turnover intentions	8,125	-.27	.22	-.25, -.29	13

Note: *N* = sample size; Mean *r* = average weighted correlation coefficient; *SD(r)* = standard deviation of *r*; *k* = number of studies.

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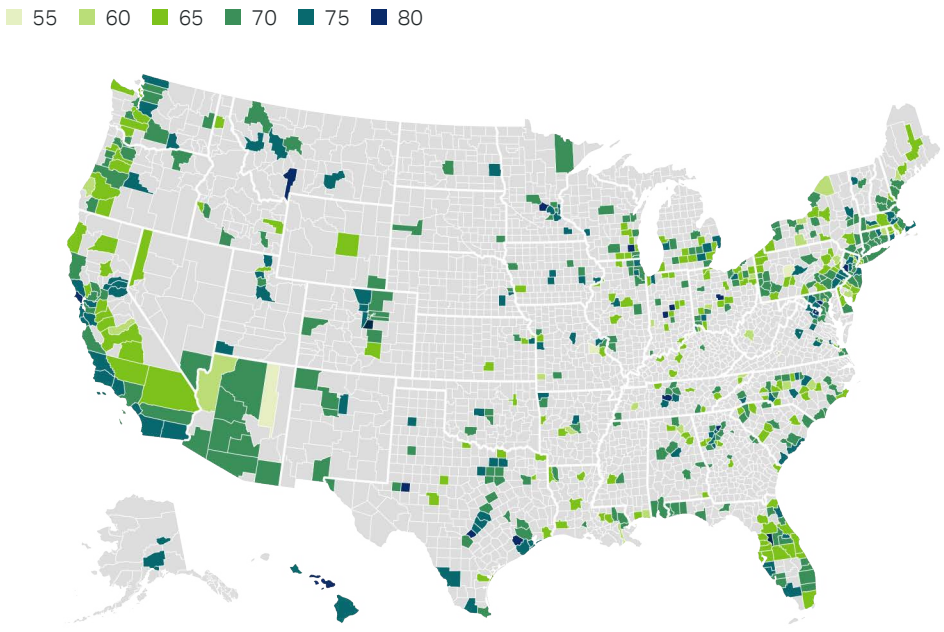
U.S. Counties Provide Insight Into the Nature of Life Evaluation

Another important finding is the divergence between current life evaluation and anticipated life evaluation at the local level. Counties generally experienced greater improvements in current life evaluation than in future life evaluation between 2008-2012 and 2013-2017, suggesting that gains in present conditions did not always translate into stronger optimism about the future (Riley et al., 2022). This pattern aligns with broader evidence that future-oriented wellbeing may be more sensitive to uncertainty, perceived opportunity and structural conditions than current life circumstances alone.

Beneath the long-term trends also lies substantial geographic variation. In an analysis of nearly 600 U.S. counties in 2013-2017, the 10 counties with the highest thriving rates reported thriving rates ranging from 66% to nearly 70%. The 10 counties with the lowest suffering rates reported suffering rates no higher than 1%. The 10 counties with the lowest thriving rates reported thriving rates ranging from 38% to 44%, and the 10 counties with the highest suffering rates reported suffering rates ranging from 7% to nearly 11% — as much as three times the national average (Riley et al., 2021a).

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Population Thriving 2013-2017

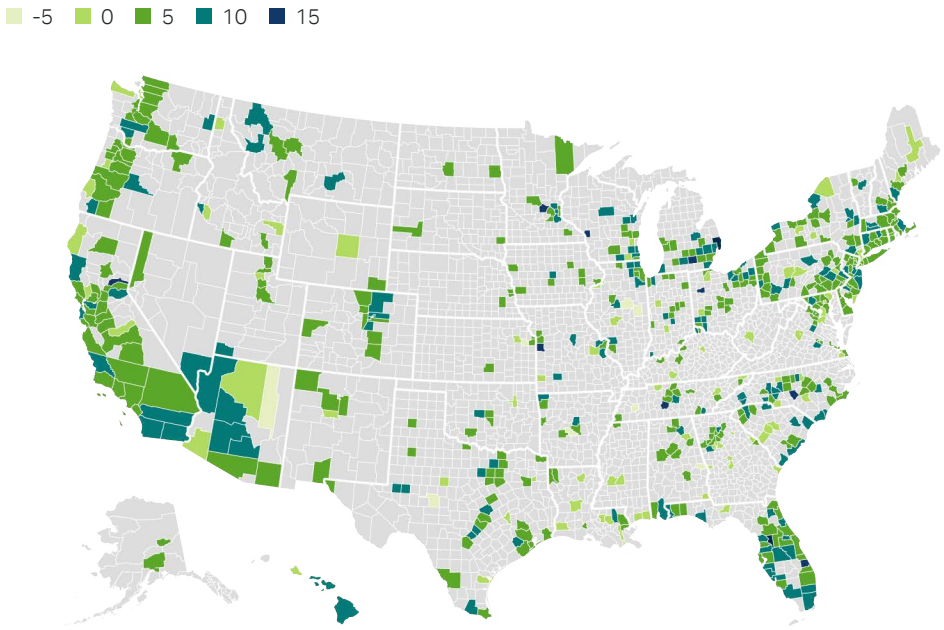


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These disparities were widespread. Some communities experienced significant improvements over time (compared to 2008-2012 estimates), while others stagnated or declined. In many cases, the gap between high- and low-wellbeing counties was larger than changes observed at the national level.

FIGURE 4

Change in Percentage of Population Thriving



For leaders, life evaluation is not just a descriptive measure, but a strategic one. It points to the conditions that matter most for helping individuals and communities move from struggling to thriving. While short-term shocks can create sharp swings in thriving, long-term trends reveal broader, more deeply rooted influences on how people think about and evaluate their lives. Understanding geographic and demographic patterns is critical for targeting interventions and addressing inequities in thriving, both across and within communities. The significant decline in thriving since the summer of 2021 underscores that life evaluation is responsive to life events, both big and small, and that it has yet to approach its full potential, calling for a decisive response.

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Important Discoveries in Life Evaluation Research

Over the past few decades, many influential studies have advanced the science of life evaluation. The following sections summarize the most important discoveries.

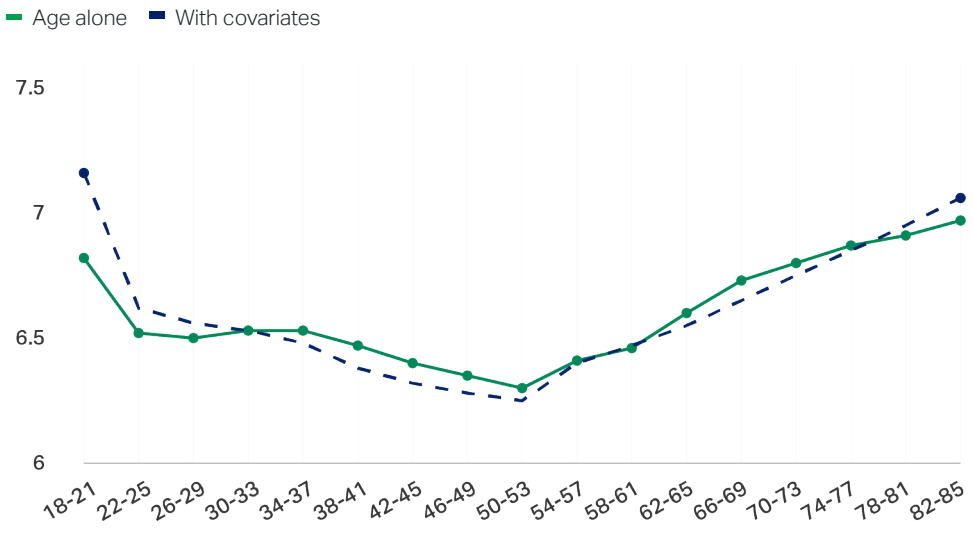
Life Evaluation and Daily Experiences Across the Lifespan

One of the most important insights from wellbeing research is that life evaluation and daily emotional experiences are related but distinct constructs. Using data from a nationally representative sample of more than 340,000 U.S. adults, researchers examined both current life evaluation and daily emotional experiences such as happiness, stress, worry and anger (Stone et al., 2010). Their findings highlight that these two dimensions of wellbeing follow different patterns over the course of life and capture different aspects of how people experience their lives.

Life satisfaction and positive emotional experiences (enjoyment and happiness) both exhibit a quadratic (U-shaped) relationship with age, declining from early adulthood into midlife, then improving steadily after about age 50.

CHART 6

Current Life Evaluation Ladder by Age



Note: Covariates are gender, marital status, children at home and employment status.

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However, negative emotional experiences (anger, stress, sadness and worry) tell a different story. Stress and anger decline sharply from early adulthood, worry remains elevated through midlife before dropping later in life, and sadness shows relatively little variation across age. In other words, even when current life evaluation is at its lowest point in midlife, some aspects of daily emotional experience — particularly stress and anger — are steadily improving, and continue to do so with age.[2]

These differences underscore a critical distinction for understanding thriving. Life evaluation (both current and anticipated life) reflects a cognitive assessment of one's life as a whole, incorporating expectations, goals and perceived progress. Daily affect, by contrast, reflects moment-to-moment emotional experiences, including both positive and negative states. The fact that these measures move differently across the lifespan suggests they are influenced by different underlying mechanisms. For example, the decline in negative emotions with age may reflect improved emotional regulation, shifting priorities or financial security, while improvements in current life evaluation later in life may reflect changing expectations, accumulated experience, financial security or a greater sense of perspective.

For leaders, efforts to improve wellbeing — and to increase the percentage of people who are thriving — must recognize that improving daily experiences (e.g., reducing stress or worry) does not automatically translate into higher life evaluation, and vice versa. Life evaluation provides a broader, integrative measure of how people see their lives overall, while daily affect offers insight into the emotional texture of those lives. Together, they provide a more complete picture of wellbeing, while also reinforcing that life evaluation is a uniquely useful indicator of what it means to lead a thriving life.

2 The thriving categorization, which is not discussed in Stone's paper and which requires high ratings (7+) for current life evaluation and high ratings (8+) for anticipated life evaluation, shows a similar quadratic curve before plunging after age 65. This is due to a steady erosion in high ratings of anticipated life evaluation by retirement age, even as the probability of having high current life evaluation continues to climb after age 75.

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Income, Life Satisfaction and Daily Emotional Experiences

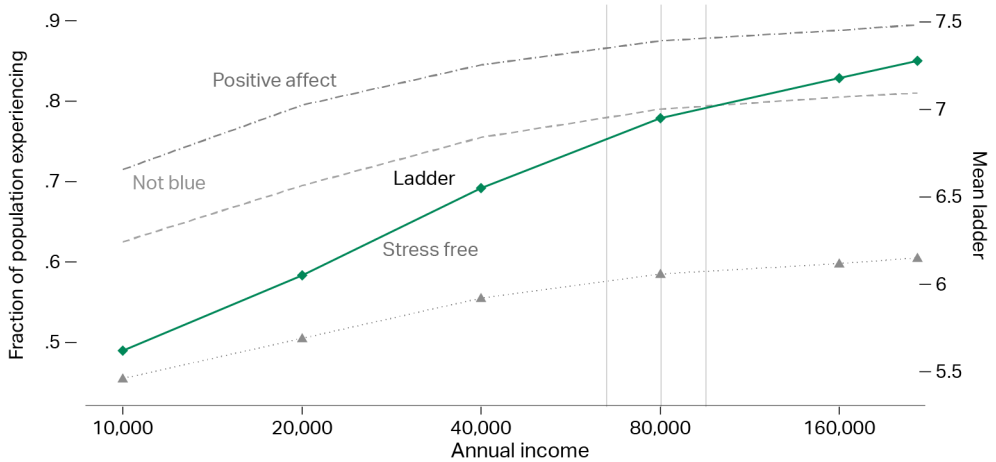
One of the most influential findings in wellbeing research is that income affects both how people evaluate their current lives and the probability of experiencing certain emotions on any given day, but in fundamentally different ways. Using more than 450,000 responses from the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index, Nobel Laureates and Gallup Senior Scientists Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton examined the relationship between household income, current life evaluation and daily emotional experience (measured by reports of significant happiness, stress, worry and sadness "yesterday"). Their results provide one of the clearest demonstrations that these two dimensions of wellbeing — evaluative (i.e., how we think about and assess our lives generally) and experiential (i.e., how we experience our lives on a day-to-day basis) — are not interchangeable (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010).

As income increases, current life evaluation also rises across the full range of the distribution. When plotted on a logarithmic scale, each increase in income is associated with a corresponding increase in how people rate their lives, with no clear upper limit (beyond the limit of the scale itself) observed in the data. In contrast, emotional wellbeing improves with income, but only up to a point before tapering off. Measures such as happiness, enjoyment, and the absence of stress or sadness improve as income rises, but these gains level off around $75,000 in annual household income (in 2010 dollars, equating to about $112,000 today). Beyond this threshold, higher income is no longer associated with improved probabilities of experiencing positive and negative daily emotions.

CHART 7

Positive Affect, Blue Affect, Stress and Life Evaluation in Relation to Household Income

Beyond about $75,000 (2010 dollars), little further change is measured in daily emotional affect, while life evaluations continue to improve



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The distinction becomes even more important when examining the effects of low income. Lower income is strongly associated with both lower current life evaluation and worse daily emotional experiences. In particular, financial strain amplifies the emotional impact of life challenges such as illness, divorce or loneliness. For example, differences in reported sadness and worry between people with and without a health condition are substantially larger among lower-income individuals than among higher-income individuals. Among lower-income individuals, those with a health condition are much more likely to report sadness and worry than those without a health condition. In contrast, higher-income individuals with and without a health condition do not report significantly different rates of sadness and worry. In this way, income functions less as a driver of positive daily emotions at higher levels and more as a buffer against emotional distress at lower levels.

These findings reinforce a central principle in the science of thriving: Life evaluation reflects a broader assessment of one's position in life, including material circumstances and perceived progress, while daily emotional wellbeing is more closely tied to immediate experiences and social conditions. Income plays a significant role in both, but in different ways. It continues to shape how people evaluate their lives even at higher levels, while its influence on daily emotional experience is concentrated primarily at the lower end of the income distribution.

Subsequent adversarial collaboration research has refined the conclusions of the original paper. In a follow-up analysis reconciling newer published findings that found different patterns for daily affect (Killingsworth, 2021), the relationship between income and emotional wellbeing was reexamined using large-scale sampling data. The results resolve the apparent contradiction with the earlier study by showing that the relationship between income and emotional wellbeing is not uniform across the population (Killingsworth et al., 2023), but rather dependent on whether a person is in the bottom range of the happiness distribution or not.

Consistent with Kahneman and Deaton's original findings, new research confirmed that current life evaluation continues to rise steadily with income across the full distribution. However, the relationship between income and daily emotional experiences is more nuanced than previously understood. Rather than a universal plateau at higher income levels, the flattening effect observed in Kahneman and Deaton's earlier work is concentrated among the least happy individuals — roughly the bottom 15% of the wellbeing distribution. For this group, increases in income are associated with significant improvements in emotional wellbeing up to a threshold (around $75,000 to $100,000 in 2023 dollars), beyond which a flattening occurs, and additional income has little effect.

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In contrast, for the majority of the population, and especially among those who are already relatively "happy" (a composite term for high positive affect and low negative affect), emotional wellbeing continues to increase with income, even at higher levels. This suggests that emotional wellbeing doesn't plateau at a certain income level but continues to improve as income climbs, assuming a baseline of good emotional health is already intact. The relationship between income and happiness varies across the distribution, with gains continuing among the happiest individuals. These findings reveal that the overall relationship between income and emotional wellbeing reflects a combination of different patterns across subgroups, rather than a single uniform effect as implied in the original paper. Income consistently shapes how people evaluate their lives, but its effects on daily emotional experience depend on where individuals fall within the wellbeing distribution. For those experiencing the greatest distress, income can alleviate negative emotions up to a point, while for others it continues to enhance the probability of positive experiences.

For leaders, increasing the prevalence of thriving requires understanding the distinction between life evaluation and daily emotional experiences. These different aspects of wellbeing behave in different ways in real-life circumstances. Wellbeing is shaped not only by external conditions such as income, but also by individuals' underlying emotional states and the circumstances that influence them.

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National Income and Life Evaluation Across Countries

At the global level, life evaluation closely tracks with differences in national income, reinforcing its role as a broad summary measure of human wellbeing. Using Gallup World Poll data from more than 130 countries, the research examined how average current life evaluation varies across national income, health and economic conditions. The results show a consistent pattern: People living in wealthier countries systematically rate their lives more positively than those in poorer countries (Deaton, 2008).

The relationship between income and life evaluation at the country level is both strong and generally continuous across the full income distribution. Countries with higher GDP per capita report higher average life evaluation, and when income is expressed on a logarithmic scale, this relationship is approximately linear. This means that each doubling of national income is associated with a similar increase in life evaluation, whether moving from very low to middle income or from middle to high income. Contrary to prior claims that income stops mattering once basic needs are met, the data show that income continues to be associated with higher life evaluation even among the richest countries.

At the same time, the findings highlight important complexities. Economic growth, when measured as short-term changes in income, is not associated with higher life evaluation and is in some cases negatively related to it. This suggests that life evaluation at the global scale may reflect longer-term, more stable assessments of living conditions rather than short-term economic fluctuations.[3] Similarly, objective measures such as life expectancy have surprisingly weak relationships with reported life evaluation once income is taken into account (Deaton, 2008), indicating that people's evaluations of their lives are shaped by a broader set of conditions rather than any single domain.

For leaders, this makes life evaluation a powerful tool for understanding differences in wellbeing across societies and for tracking progress over time. Collectively, these results reinforce the idea that life evaluation functions as an integrative measure of wellbeing at the population level. It captures the combined effects of income, health, social conditions and expectations in a single assessment of how people see their lives. While not a perfect proxy for all aspects of human welfare, its strong and consistent relationship with national income across countries suggests that people consider a wide range of life circumstances when making these evaluations.

3 Major economic shocks, such as the Great Recession or the COVID-19 pandemic, have been shown to significantly suppress life evaluation in the short term (Witters, 2026a).

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Financial Shocks, Foreclosures and Life Evaluation

While income and wealth are closely tied to life evaluation, sharp financial shocks can have equally powerful, if not more immediate, effects on how people evaluate their lives. Using data from the Great Recession, researchers examined how spikes in housing foreclosures affected both current and future life evaluations across U.S. communities. By combining Gallup wellbeing data with detailed mortgage records, the study provides evidence that financial distress at the community level can significantly reduce individual wellbeing, even among those not directly experiencing foreclosure (Makridis & Ohlrogge, 2021).

The results show that increases in foreclosures are associated with measurable declines in life evaluation. Specifically, a 10% rise in foreclosures is linked to a 0.58% decline in current life evaluation and a 0.28% decline in anticipated life evaluation. These effects are notable not only for their size, but also for their forward-looking dimension: Individuals in areas with rising foreclosures become less optimistic about their future, not just less satisfied with their present. Furthermore, these relationships persist even after controlling for income, employment and housing price changes, indicating that foreclosures are related to wellbeing through more than direct financial loss alone.

A key insight from this research is that the effects of financial shocks extend beyond the individuals directly affected. Foreclosures generate cascading effects that influence broader community wellbeing. For example, areas with higher foreclosure rates also report lower wellbeing throughout the community. These effects operate through multiple mechanisms, including declines in neighborhood quality, increased perceptions of economic risk and reduced confidence in the future.

On the whole, these findings highlight an important dimension of the science of thriving: Life evaluation is highly sensitive not only to individual circumstances, but also to shared economic environments. Negative shocks, such as widespread foreclosures, can erode wellbeing at a community level, affecting both current life evaluation and anticipated life evaluation.

> For leaders, the community-wide impact of economic shocks, such as foreclosures, underscores the importance of stabilizing local economic conditions and mitigating the broader effects of financial crises on communities, not just addressing individual hardship.

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Religiosity, Life Evaluation and Daily Experiences

A large body of research has found that religiosity is associated with higher wellbeing, but the relationship is more complex than it first appears. Using large-scale Gallup data from both the U.S. and more than 150 other countries, researchers examined how religiosity relates to current life evaluation and daily emotional experiences across different societal contexts and countries. Their findings confirm that, on average, religious individuals report slightly higher current life evaluation and more frequent experiences of positive emotions and fewer experiences of negative emotions. However, their findings also reveal that these relationships depend heavily on the broader social environment (Diener et al., 2011).

At the individual level, religiosity is positively associated with both current life evaluation and daily emotional wellbeing after accounting for life circumstances such as smoking, substance use, marital status, social class and physical activity. These relationships are relatively modest but are generally consistent across wellbeing metrics. Importantly, the benefits of religiosity appear to be mediated, in part, by key psychosocial resources — especially social support, feelings of respect, and a sense of purpose or meaning in life. In this sense, religion contributes to wellbeing indirectly as a function of strengthening the underlying conditions that support a thriving life.

Research also shows that meaning and purpose are often reinforced through social and institutional structures, and the fact that meaning in life supports individual thriving provides critical evidence that it also promotes community and societal thriving (Routledge & FioRito, 2021). As demonstrated in prior analyses, individuals who are engaged in communities that provide shared values, recognition and support are more likely to report a strong sense of purpose than those who are not. However, these benefits are not limited to religious contexts. In more economically developed and socially stable societies, individuals may derive purpose from work, community involvement or personal pursuits, achieving similarly high levels of life satisfaction without formal religious affiliation.

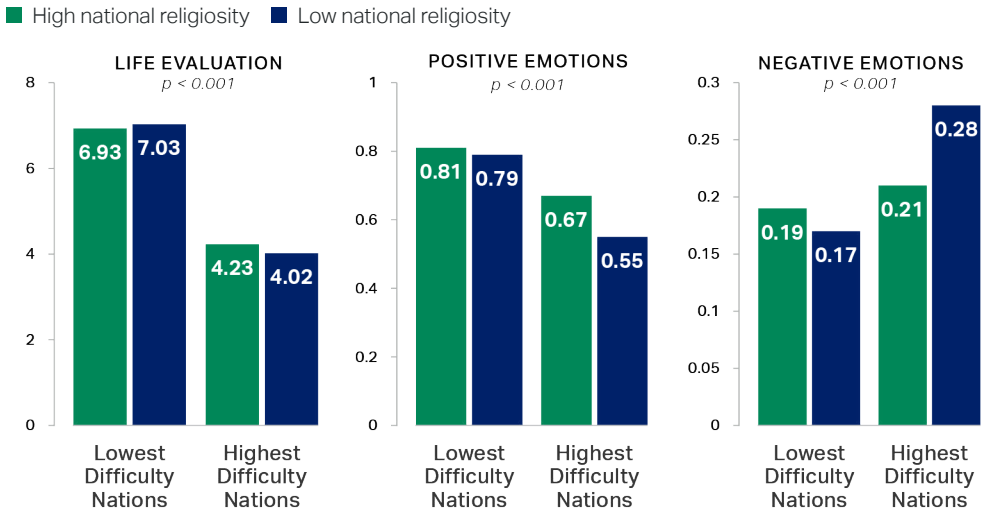
However, the relationship between religiosity and wellbeing varies substantially across societies. The countries with the highest religiosity, while more likely to have the most difficult living conditions (characterized by lower income, weaker safety nets and greater uncertainty), also show the strongest link between individual religiosity and wellbeing outcomes. In these environments, religious individuals report better life satisfaction, higher positive affect and lower negative affect than their nonreligious counterparts, suggesting that religion plays a critical role in helping people cope with the more generally adverse conditions found in their country. In contrast, in countries with the lowest level of collective religiosity that also tend to be better organized and more economically developed, the association between individual religiosity and wellbeing is weaker. In these contexts, both religious and nonreligious individuals tend to report similarly high levels of life evaluation and positive affect and similarly low levels of negative affect.

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CHART 8

Religiosity and Subjective Wellbeing in Nations Differing in Difficulty of Circumstances

In nations with poor life circumstances, religious individuals had higher life evaluations, higher positive affect and lower negative affect



This pattern helps explain the apparent paradox at the center of the research: If religiosity is associated with higher wellbeing, why is it declining in many parts of the world? The answer appears to lie in changing societal conditions. As nations become more prosperous and stable, many of the benefits historically provided by religion, such as social support, behavioral norms, safety and meaning, can be obtained through other institutions and social structures. As a result, high levels of wellbeing can be achieved with or without religiosity.

For leaders, these findings highlight that wellbeing is shaped not only by economic conditions, but also by social and cultural resources, and that the pathways to thriving can differ substantially depending on context. They also underscore that improving wellbeing requires more than addressing material needs or reducing negative experiences. Supporting opportunities for individuals to develop a sense of purpose through meaningful work, community engagement and social connection can have a lasting effect on how people evaluate their lives. As part of the broader science of thriving, meaning and purpose represent a critical pathway through which individuals interpret both their present circumstances and their future potential.

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Hope, Opportunity and the Demography of Despair

Recent research on wellbeing has increasingly emphasized that how people view their future is not just a reflection of personal optimism, but a function of broader structural conditions (Graham, 2023). Carol Graham argues that hope, defined as the belief that one's life can improve over time, is a critical but unevenly distributed component of wellbeing. In her work, she documents that declines in optimism are often concentrated among specific demographic and socioeconomic groups, even in otherwise prosperous societies, revealing deep disparities in perceived opportunity.

A central insight from this research is that individuals' expectations about their futures are closely tied to their perceptions of economic mobility and fairness. In some cases, individuals who are making objective progress — previously termed "frustrated achievers" (Graham & Pettinato, 2002) — report lower life satisfaction and higher stress because their expectations for upward mobility are not being met. This disconnect between progress and perceived trajectory highlights that wellbeing is shaped not only by absolute conditions, but also by how individuals interpret their opportunities relative to what they believe is possible.

These patterns help explain why declining anticipated life evaluation can occur even when aggregate economic indicators remain relatively stable. As seen in recent Gallup data (see Page 27), optimism about the future has eroded sharply in the U.S. despite improvements in some macroeconomic conditions. Graham builds on earlier work, suggesting that such declines may reflect loss of hope, unmet expectations, perceived barriers to advancement or a weakening belief in the attainability of a better life. In this sense, anticipated life evaluation may function as a barometer of perceived mobility and societal promise, rather than simply a natural projection of current conditions.

Importantly, this research also underscores that hope has tangible consequences. Lower levels of optimism about the future are associated with worse physical and mental health outcomes, higher stress, and reduced engagement in productive behaviors. Conversely, when individuals believe that improvement is possible, they are more likely to invest in their health, education and economic participation.

For leaders, these findings reinforce that fostering wellbeing requires more than improving current conditions. It also requires strengthening people's belief in a better future. As noted earlier, a decline in the public perception of leaders' ability to create enthusiasm for the future is associated with a decline in thriving. In this way, hope emerges as a critical, forward-looking dimension of thriving and a key indicator of societal resilience.

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Hope, Expectations and the Divergence of Life Evaluation

A critical but often underexamined dimension of wellbeing is how people view their future relative to their present. Hope theory, as articulated by Snyder (2002), defines hope as a combination of goals, perceived pathways to achieve them and the agency to pursue those pathways. In this framework, anticipated life evaluation can be understood as a population-level expression of hope, capturing not just where people are, but where they believe their lives are headed.

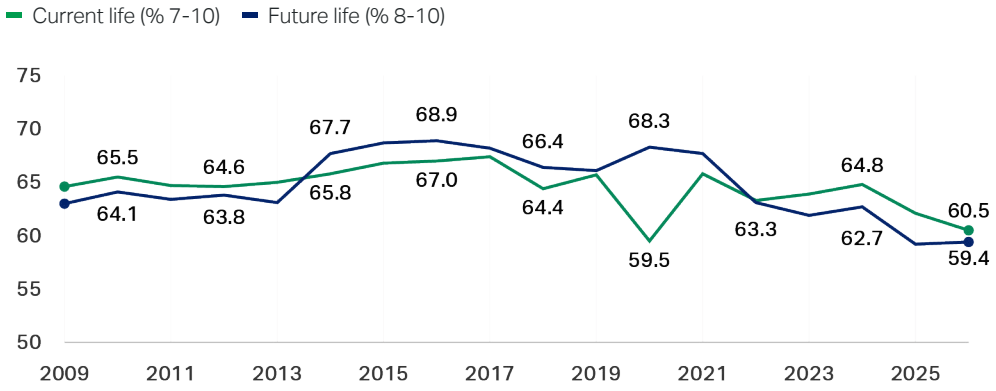
Recent Gallup data (Witters, 2026a) illustrate that current and future life evaluations do not always move together, and that their divergence can reveal important shifts in societal outlook. In 2025, the percentage of U.S. adults who gave high marks (8 to 10) to their anticipated lives fell to 59.2%, the lowest level recorded since measurement began in 2008. While current life evaluation has also declined, it has done so less sharply, resulting in a growing gap between present conditions and future expectations. This widening disconnect suggests that Americans are becoming less optimistic about their trajectory even when their current circumstances have not deteriorated as dramatically. Through the third quarter of 2026, both metrics remained at similar levels.

The long-term trend further underscores this dynamic. The relationship between current and future life evaluation has shifted over time. In the years immediately following the Great Recession, anticipated life evaluation trailed current life evaluation, reflecting deteriorated hope that characterized the financial crisis. By 2014, however, the pattern inverted, resulting in a post-recovery era of optimism. It widened sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, when anticipated life evaluation improved while current life evaluation dropped significantly, greatly eroding the thriving percentage (Witters & Harter, 2020). Since 2022, however, the pattern has inverted again, with future life evaluation falling more rapidly than current life evaluation. These shifts underscore how the two ladder measures capture distinct psychological dimensions, one rooted in present status and life experiences and the other in forward-looking belief.

CHART 9

Anticipated Life Evaluation, U.S. Adults (2009-2026)

Among U.S. adults, anticipated life in five years slumps to record low in 2025, remains suppressed as of 2026



Based on respondents' ratings of their current life and their anticipated life in five years, on a 0-10 scale.

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Optimism for Future Life Most Likely to Go Unmet Among Black Adults

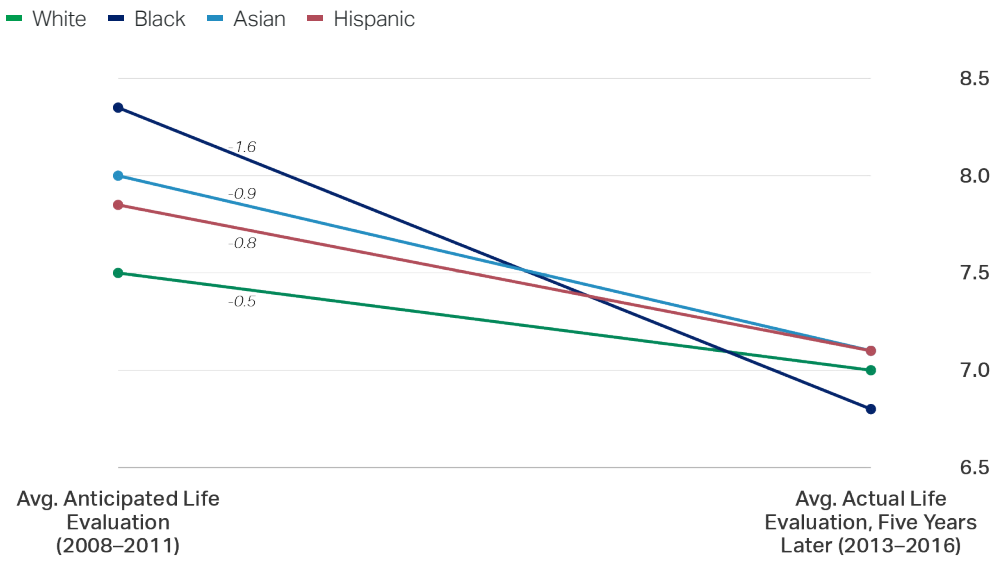
Examining both ladder items over time reveals even greater nuance across subgroups. Black adults, for example, have historically rated their current life evaluation lower than their White, Asian and Hispanic counterparts. (However, these four groups have largely converged in recent years, as shown in Chart 4.) At the same time, Black Americans have been far more optimistic than the other three groups when assessing their anticipated life evaluation. Notably, these patterns persisted when examining race and ethnicity cohorts over five-year periods, demonstrating that the elevated optimism among Black adults for their future lives comes with greater unmet expectations five years later (Witters, 2017).

CHART 10

Black Adults' Life Optimism Most Likely to Go Unmet

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?

Anticipated life evaluation: On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now?



Note: Line labels show the difference between anticipated life evaluation and actual life evaluation five years later.

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These findings show that although the thriving rate is an excellent summary measure of population wellbeing, current and anticipated life evaluation must be analyzed separately to better understand and contextualize it. While the thriving classification integrates both components, it can obscure meaningful divergence between present conditions and future outlook.

For leaders, declines in future life ratings that outpace declines in current life ratings may serve as an early warning signal, indicating rising uncertainty, loss of faith in institutions, diminished perceived opportunity or a weakening belief in upward mobility. Examining anticipated life evaluation provides insight into the future-oriented dimension of thriving and the broader sense of hope within a population.

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Community Organizing Around Wellbeing

Over the past 15 years, a growing number of communities have begun incorporating wellbeing into planning, measurement and decision-making (Saha et al., 2020). While these initiatives vary considerably in structure and scope, they share a common interest in understanding how residents experience their lives and using that information to inform action (Roulier, 2025). As such, Gallup and The Rippel Foundation are working together to bridge the science of wellbeing with the practice of improving it in communities across the country.

These efforts span a wide range of geographies and organizational models across the U.S. Some are led by local governments, others by health systems, philanthropic organizations, nonprofit networks or multisector partnerships. Some focus on neighborhoods, while others operate at county, regional or statewide levels. Despite these differences, many have adopted similar goals: improving equitable wellbeing, strengthening community conditions and developing better ways to track progress.

Evidence of Growing Interest in Community Wellbeing

The community examples that follow are part of a broader trend. Across multiple sectors, interest is growing in measuring wellbeing, understanding the conditions that influence it, and incorporating those insights into decisions about policies and investment priorities (Erickson et al., 2023).

Several indicators suggest this interest has expanded in recent years. Academic research focused on wellbeing, community conditions, belonging, social connection and related topics has increased substantially. Internet and database searches and published references involving concepts such as thriving, stewardship and vital conditions have also grown over time. While these measures do not indicate how many communities are actively using wellbeing frameworks, they do suggest heightened attention to these ideas among researchers, practitioners and community organizations.

Interest has also expanded beyond academic settings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations from multiple sectors collaborated to develop frameworks for recovery that emphasized wellbeing, resilience and community conditions alongside traditional economic indicators (Milstein et al., 2020). In subsequent years, elements of these frameworks were incorporated into federal, state and local planning, reflecting growing recognition that wellbeing is influenced by factors beyond health and economic performance (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022; Milstein et al., 2023; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023).

Survey research suggests a similar pattern among organizational leaders. In a national survey of leaders from public health agencies, healthcare organizations, businesses, nonprofits and community groups, large majorities expressed support for goals such as expanding opportunity, strengthening communities and addressing conditions that

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influence wellbeing (Erickson et al., 2022). Although organizations differed in their specific priorities and approaches, many shared a belief that long-term improvements in wellbeing require attention to broader social and community conditions.

These developments suggest that interest in wellbeing is expanding across research, policy and practice. Communities continue to adopt a wide range of approaches, and while there is no single prescription for improving wellbeing, they all focus on improving community conditions. The growing use of wellbeing measures and related frameworks suggests that more communities are seeking ways to understand not only economic and health outcomes, but also how residents experience their lives.

Several examples illustrate the breadth of this work. In North Carolina, Thriving Together Forsyth has brought together organizations from multiple sectors to coordinate around shared aspirations for wellbeing. In Florida, BeWellPBC has pursued wellbeing through a novel set of behavioral health initiatives and community engagement efforts. In Delaware, Healthy Communities Delaware has integrated wellbeing concepts into statewide planning and investment strategies. In California, Beach Cities Health District has implemented a wide array of community programs for both adults and youth, including enlisting the Blue Zones Project to help residents live healthier, longer lives (Beach Cities Health District, 2026; Riley et al., 2021b). Gallup research estimates that the Beach Cities save about $182 million on healthcare costs each year due to lower rates of obesity, diabetes and smoking compared with U.S. averages (Witters, 2024).

Similar programs are underway in Washington, West Virginia and other parts of the country.

These examples do not represent a single model or coordinated national initiative. Rather, they demonstrate growing interest in wellbeing as a meaningful outcome for communities seeking to improve health, equitable opportunities and quality of life. Collectively, they suggest that wellbeing measurement is increasingly being used not only to understand community conditions, but also to guide discussions about priorities, investments and long-term goals.

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Table 2 highlights several examples of community-based initiatives that have incorporated wellbeing into their work. While each reflects local priorities and circumstances, together they illustrate the expanding range of approaches communities are using to better understand and improve the lives of their residents.

TABLE 2

Examples of Community Wellbeing Initiatives

Initiative	Geography	Profile
Beach Cities Health District	Southern California City Urban and suburban	The Beach Cities Health District (BCHD) has implemented a range of community programs, including care management, mental health services and worksite wellness programs. Since 2010, BCHD has also partnered with the Blue Zones Project, which has helped transform the community's infrastructure to improve walkability and increase resident access to healthy food options in restaurants, grocery stores, schools and workplaces.
BeWellPBC	Sun Belt City and county Urban and suburban	BeWellPBC is a countywide initiative focused on behavioral health and wellbeing. It brings together residents, community organizations, health providers, schools and local leaders to improve mental health outcomes, expand access to services and support community-led solutions. Programs include neighborhood-based grants, youth engagement and public education initiatives.
Contra Costa Together	West Coast City and county Urban	Contra Costa Together focuses on strengthening relationships and collaboration across communities before pursuing large-scale initiatives. Its approach emphasizes trust-building, community dialogue and multisector partnerships as the foundation for long-term improvements in wellbeing and community conditions.
Healthy Communities Delaware	Mid-Atlantic Statewide Urban and rural	Healthy Communities Delaware supports community-driven projects that address local wellbeing priorities across the state. Through partnerships among public, private and nonprofit organizations, the initiative invests in efforts designed to improve community conditions, expand opportunities and strengthen wellbeing in areas experiencing persistent challenges.

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Initiative	Geography	Profile
North Sound Accountable Community of Health	Pacific Northwest Multicounty Rural and island communities	Serving five counties and eight Tribal Nations, the North Sound Accountable Community of Health coordinates efforts among healthcare organizations, tribal governments, educators and community partners. The initiative focuses on improving wellbeing through multisector collaboration while recognizing the importance of tribal leadership and local priorities.
Thriving Together Forsyth	Southeast City and county Urban and suburban	Thriving Together Forsyth is a multisector initiative in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County that brings together nonprofit organizations, community groups, local leaders and residents around a shared goal of improving wellbeing. The initiative uses data, community engagement and coordinated investment strategies to address multiple factors associated with thriving across the region.
Wild, Wonderful & Healthy West Virginia	Appalachia Statewide Mostly rural	Led by the Center for Rural Health Development, this statewide initiative supports community partnerships designed to improve health and wellbeing across West Virginia. It encourages collaboration among local organizations, health systems and community leaders to address factors that influence quality of life and long-term wellbeing.

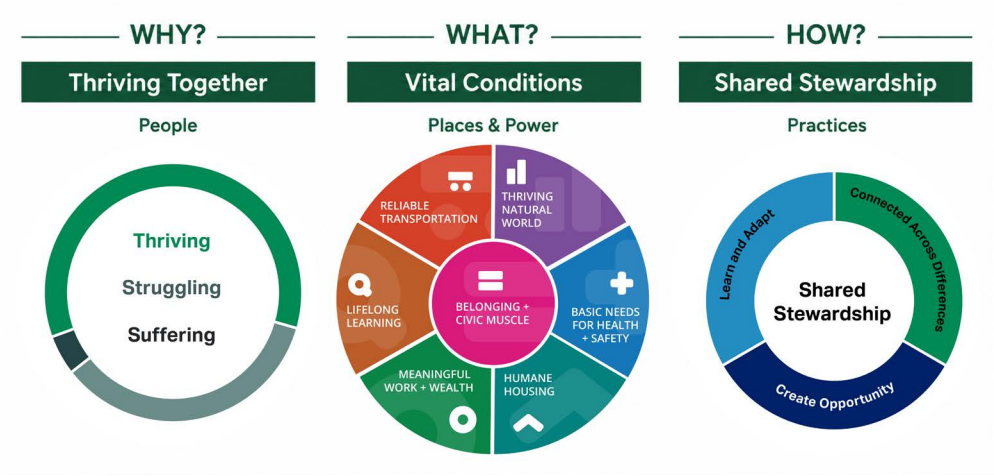
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A Practical Framework for Community Wellbeing

The community examples reflect different geographies, institutions and priorities, but many share a similar framework centered on three core elements: a unifying outcome, a focus on the conditions that support equitable wellbeing, and a collaborative approach to strengthen those conditions over time (The Rippel Foundation, 2026c).

FIGURE 5

Elements of a Thriving Together Framework



The first element is a unifying outcome — helping more people and places thrive together. For communities using Gallup's Life Evaluation Index or similar measures, thriving provides a measurable way to assess whether residents evaluate their current lives positively and are optimistic about the future. This gives communities a common reference point for tracking progress and identifying promising opportunities. In addition, comparing local trends with regional and national trends measured on an ongoing basis by Gallup helps to contextualize progress.

The second element is the set of conditions that influence wellbeing. The Rippel Foundation and many contributors have developed a widely used vital conditions framework, which identifies seven community-level assets people need to live well and reach their potential. These include "a thriving natural world, basic needs for health and safety, humane housing, meaningful work and wealth, lifelong learning, reliable transportation, and, central to all of these, belonging and civic muscle" (The Rippel Foundation, 2026d). The framework is useful because it situates individual behavior within broader conditions that shape people's lives together in communities over generations (Milstein et al., 2023).

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The third element is collaboration across organizations. Improving community wellbeing requires coordinated action from multiple groups, including residents, nonprofits, public agencies, healthcare organizations, schools, businesses and philanthropy. No single organization controls all the conditions that influence whether people are thriving, struggling or suffering. Communities that make progress typically establish practices that encourage people from different groups to think and act interdependently when they communicate, coordinate investments and learn together over time (The Rippel Foundation, 2026b; ReThink Health, 2023).

Taken together, these elements offer a practical way for communities to organize their work:

- a unifying outcome to clarify what progress means
- a focus on vital conditions to identify what must improve
- multisector collaboration that translates measurement into tangible action

Although communities may apply this framework differently depending on local context, the underlying logic is consistent: Increasing wellbeing requires both reliable data and coordinated efforts to improve the conditions of daily life.

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Building the Capacity to Measure and Improve Wellbeing

Communities interested in improving wellbeing often face two practical questions: What should be measured, and at what level?

National surveys such as the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index provide important context and long-term benchmarks. They help communities understand how local results compare with broader trends and offer a consistent way to track changes over time. At the same time, national data alone are rarely detailed enough to inform decisions at the neighborhood, city or county level.

Local measurement helps fill this gap. Community surveys can provide more detailed information about local conditions, identify differences across neighborhoods and capture issues that may not be visible in national datasets. When designed carefully, local efforts also create opportunities for residents, organizations and community leaders to engage with the findings and use them to guide planning and decision-making.

The strongest approaches generally combine both perspectives. National, regional and state data provide comparability and long-term context, while local data provide specificity and relevance. In tandem, they create a more complete understanding of wellbeing and the factors that influence it, while contextualizing what is being measured locally.

The experiences of communities such as Greater Cincinnati and Fox Valley (see Pages 36 and 39, respectively) illustrate how wellbeing measurement can develop over time. Although each community has followed a different path, all have invested in their ability to collect, interpret and apply wellbeing data in ways that support local decision-making. Greater Cincinnati illustrates how measurement systems often evolve incrementally. There, pilot efforts expanded into neighborhood-level measurement, which eventually led to regional survey infrastructure and ongoing wellbeing tracking.

Despite advances in community wellbeing measurement, significant challenges remain. Many communities lack the financial resources, technical expertise or organizational infrastructure needed to sustain long-term measurement. Expanding access to reliable wellbeing measurement remains an important opportunity for communities seeking to better understand and improve local conditions.

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Common Lessons From Community Measurement

Representative data matter.

Communities that invest in reliable sampling are better positioned to understand local conditions and track change over time.

Some populations require additional attention.

Oversampling and targeted outreach can help ensure that groups often underrepresented in surveys are adequately represented in the data.

Data are most useful when communities own the information and collectively interpret the findings.

Measurement becomes more valuable when residents, organizations and local leaders decide what matters, own the data they gather and interpret how the results should inform action.

The examples that follow illustrate different approaches to this work. While each community operates in a unique context, they share a common interest in understanding how residents experience their lives, identifying factors associated with thriving, and using those insights to inform local priorities, initiatives and offerings. As a group, these examples demonstrate how wellbeing measurement can support learning, collaboration and community improvement over time. One of the clearest examples comes from Greater Cincinnati.

How Greater Cincinnati Built a Regional Wellbeing Measurement System

Residents and organizational leaders in the Greater Cincinnati region have spent more than a decade building their capacity to measure and improve wellbeing (All Children Thrive, n.d.). What began as a series of small exploratory efforts has evolved into one of the most comprehensive regional wellbeing measurement initiatives in the U.S.

Early work focused on a simple question: Could thriving serve as a meaningful outcome for children, families and communities? Local leaders began by introducing Cantril's ladder items in small community settings to better understand how residents evaluated their lives. The results generated immediate interest. Participants found the questions intuitive and meaningful, while organizations saw potential value in using wellbeing measures to complement traditional health, education and social service indicators.

Over time, measurement expanded across multiple settings, including schools, service organizations and community initiatives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local partners conducted wellbeing surveys across several Cincinnati neighborhoods, generating new insights into how residents were experiencing unprecedented social and economic disruption. The results reinforced interest in using wellbeing data not only to understand local conditions, but also to guide action.

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As demand for population-level information grew, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center established a formal partnership with Gallup to develop a more comprehensive regional approach to wellbeing measurement. Together, the organizations designed survey efforts capable of producing representative estimates across multiple geographic levels. The resulting system provides ongoing data about thriving, struggling and suffering, as well as many of the conditions associated with wellbeing, including physical and mental health, social support, connections to the community, racial discrimination in housing, faith in institutions, and intra-household child wellbeing.

Today, wellbeing data are being used throughout the region to inform a wide range of initiatives. These include programs focused on food security, youth wellbeing, belonging, neighborhood development, child welfare, juvenile justice and economic vitality (All Children Thrive, n.d.; Schuh et al., 2024; Mayerson Child Well-being Initiative, n.d.; Quinn et al., 2026). Additional initiatives now measure wellbeing among both adults and young people, creating a richer understanding of how residents experience life across different stages of development.

HEY! Greater Cincinnati, a diverse coalition of youth and hundreds of community partners, is partnering with Surgo Health to measure the conditions that shape youth wellbeing and thriving in ages 13 to 24 across the region (Hopeful Empowered Youth, n.d.; Surgo Health, n.d.). Co-led by youth, the survey tracks constructs such as sense of belonging, personal and collective agency, trusted adults, meaning, and purpose. Understanding these strengths, gaps and inequities is enabling the community to work together to change the conditions and systems that help young people thrive.

Greater Cincinnati's experience illustrates how wellbeing measurement can evolve from small-scale experimentation into long-term community infrastructure. The process did not begin with a comprehensive measurement system. Instead, it developed incrementally. As organizations recognized the value of understanding how residents evaluate their lives, they increasingly incorporated those insights into planning, decision-making and community improvement.

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Examples of Wellbeing Measurement in Practice

Greater Cincinnati is not alone in its interest in measuring wellbeing. Across the U.S., communities are increasingly incorporating wellbeing data into planning, community assessment, policy development and improvement initiatives.

These efforts vary considerably in scale and structure. Some are organized through health systems, others through local governments, nonprofit organizations, philanthropic institutions or multisector partnerships. Some focus on individual neighborhoods, while others operate across counties, regions or entire states. Despite these differences, many share a common objective: using wellbeing data to better understand how residents experience their lives and to guide decisions intended to improve community wellbeing.

Table 3 highlights examples of wellbeing measurement operating in diverse geographic, organizational and demographic settings across the U.S.

TABLE 3

Examples of Wellbeing Measurement in Practice

Initiative	Geography	Profile
Communities RISE Together	Nationwide: 38 states, tribes and territories	Communities RISE Together supports community-led data collection among populations that are often underrepresented in traditional surveys. Participating organizations gather information on wellbeing, trust, basic needs and related topics to better understand local conditions and inform community-driven action. During the COVID-19 pandemic, participating organizations collected data across hundreds of communities, revealing greater wellbeing challenges than previously recognized (Saha, personal communication, March 20, 2026).
DataHaven	Northeast Statewide Urban and rural	DataHaven coordinates one of the nation's largest statewide community wellbeing survey efforts. Results are reported at local levels across Connecticut, providing communities with data that support planning, funding decisions and public discussion. The survey also includes populations and experiences that are often difficult to capture through conventional data sources (Abraham, personal communication, March 20, 2026).

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Initiative	Geography	Profile
Inland Empire Vital Conditions Network	West Multicounty Urban and suburban	The Inland Empire Vital Conditions Network uses survey data and community engagement to better understand wellbeing across Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Research conducted with University of California, Riverside (UCR) identified belonging and civic participation as important contributors to wellbeing, helping inform subsequent learning and investment initiatives throughout the region (UCR Center for Community Solutions, 2025).
Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health	Mid-Atlantic City, county and neighborhood Post-industrial urban	The Leonard Parker Pool Institute for Health combines community-level wellbeing measurement with neighborhood-focused planning in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Its work emphasizes resident experiences and local conditions, helping inform initiatives to improve wellbeing in communities facing persistent social and economic challenges (Shaak & Arndt, personal communication, March 20, 2026).
Northeast Wisconsin Data Exchange	Midwest Multicounty Post-industrial urban and rural	Organizations across Wisconsin's Fox Valley have conducted multiple waves of regional wellbeing surveys, expanding both the scope and rigor of measurement over time. Survey findings have been incorporated into community health assessment and improvement planning processes used by public health departments and healthcare organizations. The effort demonstrates how repeated measurement can support regional collaboration and long-term planning (Schulist, personal communication, March 20, 2026).

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Initiative	Geography	Profile
Thriving Together North Central Washington	Pacific Northwest Multicounty Rural and small city	Originally formed as an Accountable Community of Health, Thriving Together NCW expanded its focus to include broader measures of wellbeing. The organization now conducts regional wellbeing surveys, maintains public dashboards and incorporates community discussions into its interpretation and use of local data (Institute for People, Place, and Possibility, 2024; Community Commons, n.d.).
Santa Monica Civic Wellbeing Project	West Coast City Urban	The City of Santa Monica launched its Civic Wellbeing Project with support from the Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors Challenge, partnering with RAND and the New Economics Foundation to build a Civic Wellbeing Index across six domains. Findings informed budgeting and programs for almost a decade, including a Wellbeing Microgrant Program to fund resident-led projects. Budget pressure from the COVID-19 pandemic, along with political shifts, led to the closure of the city's Office of Wellbeing. However, many of the partnerships, staff expertise and measurement practices have continued, including the establishment of the nonprofit Civic Wellbeing Partners, which supports cities' wellbeing efforts and the microgrant program (Wellbeing Economy Alliance, 2022).

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Core Principles for Real Improvement

The examples throughout this report demonstrate that successful wellbeing initiatives require more than data collection alone. Communities must also be able to interpret what the data mean, identify priorities and use those insights to guide decisions. This basic framework rests on two core capabilities.

The first is the ability to measure and monitor wellbeing consistently over time. This includes tracking thriving, struggling and suffering, along with the community conditions associated with those outcomes. Reliable measurement helps communities establish baselines, monitor trends and evaluate whether conditions are improving or deteriorating.

The second is the ability to interpret and apply what the data reveal. Communities that make effective use of wellbeing data create opportunities for discussion among residents, organizations and local leaders. These conversations help translate findings into decisions about priorities, investments and future action.

Neither capability is sufficient on its own. Measurement without action produces information but little change, while action without measurement makes it difficult to understand whether progress is occurring. Communities that develop both capabilities are better positioned to learn, adapt and improve wellbeing over time.

Building the Capacity to Understand and Improve Wellbeing

Communities that make sustained progress generally develop both the ability to measure wellbeing consistently and the capacity to translate findings into planning, investment decisions and community action (Chandra et al., 2025; Community Commons, 2026). They track who is thriving, struggling and suffering, as well as the community conditions that shape those experiences. They assess whether progress is equitable and disaggregate results across the subgroups that matter most, and they encourage distributed ownership that can withstand inevitable leadership transitions and funding disruptions.

These activities require more than technical infrastructure. They also require processes that help organizations, residents and community leaders interpret the data, discuss their implications and use them to inform decisions over time. While approaches differ across communities, three common principles have emerged from organizations that have incorporated wellbeing measurement into their work.

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1 Use Data to Build a Shared Understanding

Communities often view measurement as a way to assess progress. Equally important, however, is its ability to create a shared understanding of local conditions.

When residents, organizations and community leaders have access to meaningful information about wellbeing, they are better positioned to identify common challenges, discuss priorities and coordinate action across multiple organizations. In this way, data can serve as a starting point for conversation rather than simply a reporting tool.

The Fox Valley experience (see Table 3) illustrates this principle. Several coalitions and philanthropic organizations adopted the vital conditions framework. Repeated wellbeing surveys provided organizations throughout the region with a common set of measures and a shared language for discussing community conditions. Over time, participation expanded, more organizations became involved and survey findings were incorporated into broader community planning. The value of the surveys extended beyond the data themselves; they helped create a common understanding of local wellbeing and encouraged collaboration among groups that might not otherwise have worked together (Schulist, personal communication, March 20, 2026).

For communities seeking to improve wellbeing, the lesson is clear. Measurement is most useful when it helps people understand a shared reality and provides a foundation for productive discussion about collective impact and what comes next.

2 Connect Measurement to Decision-Making

Collecting data is relatively easy compared with putting data to work. Many communities generate reports and dashboards that receive attention when they are released but have little influence on subsequent decisions.

Communities that use wellbeing measurement successfully tend to build processes that connect findings to planning, funding decisions and community action. This often involves bringing together organizations, local leaders and residents to discuss what the results mean and how they should inform priorities moving forward.

DataHaven's statewide survey effort (Table 3) provides one example. In addition to collecting and reporting data, the organization works with communities throughout Connecticut to interpret findings and apply them to local planning. Reports are distributed at the community level, allowing local organizations to use the information for grant applications, strategic planning and public discussion. A key insight from DataHaven's experience is that when sample sizes are large enough and data collection methodology is deliberately inclusive of marginalized portions of the population, the thriving and vital conditions experiences of groups can be estimated in ways that conventional surveys routinely cannot reach. The result is that wellbeing data become part of decision-making rather than remaining a standalone research product (Abraham, personal communication, March 20, 2026).

The broader lesson is that measurement creates value only when it informs action. Communities that connect data to decision-making are more likely to translate information into meaningful improvements over time. This capacity also requires different ways of reasoning about what the data reveal — ways that take seriously the complexity of the systems that shape wellbeing over time. Simulation models, for instance, help planners make sense of longitudinal patterns, explore how today's investment decisions are likely to play out over a decade or two, and identify leverage points that are not otherwise obvious (Sterman, 2006; Homer & Hirsch, 2006).

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3 Build for Long-Term Sustainability

Building a wellbeing measurement system requires significant time, effort and organizational commitment. Sustaining that system over many years can be even more challenging.

Leadership changes, shifting priorities, funding constraints and unexpected events can all disrupt community initiatives. Communities that achieve lasting success invest both in the measurement itself and in the relationships, partnerships and organizational structures needed to sustain the work over time.

Santa Monica's experience illustrates both the opportunities and challenges involved. The city successfully integrated wellbeing measurement into planning and decision-making for many years, demonstrating how wellbeing can become part of local governance.

Although institutional priorities later shifted and formal infrastructure eroded, many of the personal relationships, organizational networks and training practices developed during that early period continued to influence community efforts. Their experience highlights the persistent challenges of regression and the need to build relationships that endure beyond individual leaders, projects or political cycles.

For communities seeking to improve wellbeing, learning and adaptation must also be ongoing. Measurement systems are most valuable when they can continue providing insight and guidance over extended periods of time. The Inland Empire of Southern California provides one example of how this process can unfold in practice.

The Inland Empire: Using Data to Identify Community Priorities

The Inland Empire of Southern California provides an example of how wellbeing data can inform community decision-making at a regional scale.

Organizations throughout Riverside and San Bernardino counties partnered with the UCR Center for Community Solutions to better understand residents' experiences of wellbeing, belonging and civic participation. The resulting research provided new insights into conditions across one of the nation's largest and most diverse regions (UCR Center for Community Solutions, 2025).

One finding stood out. The data suggested that "belonging and civic muscle" was closely associated with wellbeing and represented an important opportunity for improvement. Community organizations, philanthropic institutions and regional partners used those findings to inform discussions about priorities, investments and future initiatives.

The research also stimulated broader community conversations through reports, public events and regional convenings. By making the findings accessible to organizations and residents, the effort created opportunities for discussion about how wellbeing could be improved across the region.

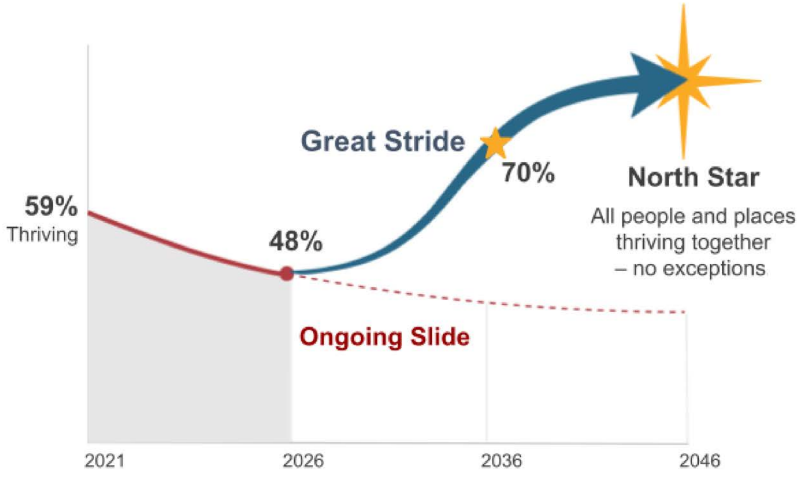
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Goal Setting and Benchmarking Progress

The decline in wellbeing over the past several years raises an important question: What would meaningful improvement look like? For communities and organizations working to improve wellbeing, setting measurable goals can clarify priorities, align efforts and evaluate progress over time. The challenge is determining what level of improvement is both ambitious and realistic.

FIGURE 6

Setting Stretch Goals for the National Thriving Rate



One proposal advanced by several wellbeing-focused organizations is the long-term goal of increasing thriving by 20 percentage points over a decade (The Rippel Foundation, 2026a). The goal is intentionally ambitious (Hardy & Erickson, 2025). At the current national level, achieving an increase of that magnitude would represent a substantial improvement in Americans' life evaluations and would reverse much of the decline observed since 2021.

Historical experience suggests that meaningful gains are possible. Gallup data show that several U.S. counties have achieved double-digit improvements in thriving in under a decade (Riley et al., 2022), while periods of national recovery have demonstrated that life evaluation can improve significantly when conditions change. At the same time, the scale of a 20-point increase would greatly exceed what has been observed at the national level since the onset of measurement (Witters, 2025), making it best viewed as a benchmark for discussion rather than a forecast.

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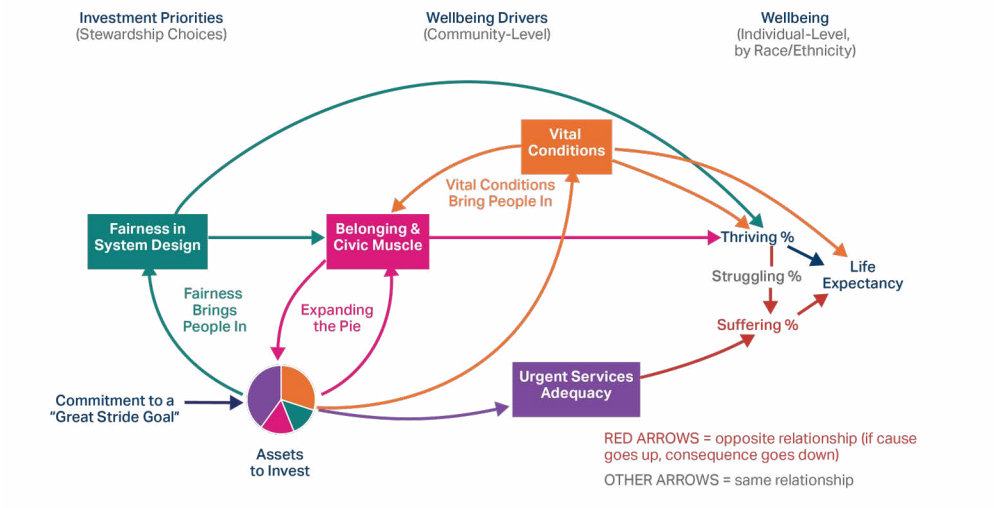
To better understand how community conditions influence wellbeing over time, Rippel Foundation researchers and associated contributors developed the Thriving Together Simulation Model (Milstein et al., 2022; Milstein et al., 2025; Homer et al., 2026). The model incorporates evidence linking wellbeing to multiple community-level conditions and allows users to explore how different investment strategies could influence thriving, suffering and related outcomes over time. Figure 7 provides an overview of the model.

When calibrated with available data (Institute for People, Place, and Possibility, 2025), the model reproduces recent trends in wellbeing and can explore alternative futures for virtually any geographic region in the U.S. One example is the Franklin Park neighborhood of Allentown, Pennsylvania, where people experience significantly lower wellbeing than the rest of Allentown and the U.S. overall. Community leaders have developed a Great Strides portfolio, a set of 16 initiatives that are increasingly influential in Franklin Park (Homer et al., 2026).

The Thriving Together model, calibrated for Franklin Park and its Great Strides portfolio, indicated that the portfolio could significantly redirect the decline in wellbeing. The model suggested the portfolio could potentially lead to a double-digit increase in thriving in the first decade, and a further increase in the following decade, similar to the trajectory in Figure 6. The model suggests that these improvements, which begin with targeted community asset investments, can become self-sustaining through the "expanding the pie" and "bring people in" feedback loops seen in Figure 7 (Homer et al., 2026; Milstein et al., 2025).

FIGURE 7

Overview of the Thriving Together Simulation Model



Whether any specific target is ultimately adopted, the broader point remains: Improving wellbeing requires more than measuring current conditions. It requires defining what success looks like, tracking progress and investing in the actions most likely to produce meaningful change. Ambitious goals can help focus attention, provided they are accompanied by realistic plans and ongoing evaluation.

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Opportunities for Greater Community Progress

The examples throughout this report demonstrate what is possible when communities invest in wellbeing measurement and use the resulting information to guide action. They also reveal an important challenge: Not every community has access to the resources, expertise or infrastructure needed to build and sustain this work.

Many of the highlighted initiatives benefited from long-term partnerships, dedicated staff, technical expertise and sustained financial support, but communities facing the greatest wellbeing challenges often have the least access to these resources. Expanding wellbeing measurement and planning will therefore require approaches that are accessible to a wider range of populations.

Several common needs emerge across community examples. Communities need reliable, affordable tools to measure wellbeing and track change over time with data they can own and trust. They need technical expertise and support to help interpret findings and translate them into practical decisions. They also need sustainable funding to ensure measurement efforts continue beyond individual grants, projects or leadership transitions.

Technology can support these efforts, but technology alone is not sufficient. Communities that make effective use of wellbeing data combine measurement with local knowledge, organizational partnerships, and ongoing engagement with residents, businesses and community leaders. These relationships help ensure that the data remain relevant, understandable and useful.

The broader opportunity is not simply to expand measurement. It is to strengthen communities' ability to understand local conditions, identify priorities and make informed decisions that improve wellbeing over time. As more communities adopt wellbeing measures and share lessons learned, opportunities will grow to strengthen local efforts and deepen broader understanding of what contributes to thriving.

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Conclusion

As summarized in this report, wellbeing in the U.S. — defined by the Life Evaluation Index's thriving rate — has deteriorated meaningfully in recent years. The factors associated with this trend are not just measurable but also understandable and, in many cases, responsive to action.

Two decades of Gallup measurement and research show that the Life Evaluation Index provides a powerful lens through which to understand how people think about and assess their lives. Thriving is associated with better health, stronger financial security, meaningful relationships, a sense of purpose and optimism about the future. At the same time, recent declines in thriving, particularly among young adults and other key demographic groups, highlight growing challenges that deserve attention from community leaders, policymakers, health systems and others working to improve quality of life.

The examples presented demonstrate that communities can do more than just observe these trends. Across the country, organizations are increasingly using wellbeing data to better understand their local conditions, identify priorities and inform decisions. While approaches vary, the most successful efforts share three common characteristics. They:

1) Measure population wellbeing scientifically and consistently.
2) Engage local community members alongside subject matter experts in contextualizing the findings.
3) Use those insights to guide action over time.

The simulation modeling of alternative investment scenarios presented in this report suggests that meaningful improvements in wellbeing may be possible when communities make sustained investments in the conditions associated with thriving. While these scenarios should be viewed as illustrative rather than predictive, such decision support tools reinforce the important point that wellbeing is not fixed and never has been. Rather, it changes as people's lives, relationships, opportunities and communities change over time.

For leaders, the implications are straightforward. Measuring wellbeing provides valuable information about how people's life experiences influence how satisfied they are with their lives. Tracking those measures over time can help identify emerging challenges and evaluate progress across multiple interventions. Most importantly, wellbeing data can help communities focus attention on the conditions that matter most to helping more people thrive.

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The central question facing communities is not whether wellbeing matters — the evidence presented throughout this report strongly indicates that it does. The question is how communities will use that knowledge to become places where more people thrive together. Those that combine quality measurement with sustained learning, dialogue, collaboration and action will be better positioned to understand local needs, respond to changing conditions and improve wellbeing over time.

The sharp decline in wellbeing among younger adults over the past 16 years serves as a vivid reminder that future progress cannot be assumed and that improvements in thriving will require deliberate effort. The opportunity ahead, therefore, is both practical and measurable: to better understand what contributes to thriving, to learn from communities that are making progress and to create, in turn, conditions that allow more people to live healthy, meaningful and fulfilling lives.

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Appendix

Technical Features of the Gallup Life Evaluation Index

This appendix provides a technical summary of the Life Evaluation Index (LEI) — how it is constructed, what makes it particularly well suited for population-level tracking over time and what its recognized limitations are. It is offered not as a reason to hesitate, but as an honest accounting for readers who want to use this measure well.

Construction: The LEI is built on Cantril's Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (Cantril, 1965), which asks respondents to imagine a ladder with the best possible life at the top (10) and the worst possible life at the bottom (0), and to place themselves on that ladder today and five years from now. Respondents scoring 7 or higher currently and 8 or higher in five years are classified as thriving. Those scoring 4 or lower on both questions are classified as suffering. All others are struggling (Gallup, 2009).

Strengths of the measure include:

Cross-cultural universality: The ladder metaphor is understood in virtually every society and language, enabling internationally comparable measurement.

Linguistic neutrality: The questions translate relatively cleanly across languages without conceptual distortion.

Real-time responsiveness: The measure responds rapidly to meaningful changes in people's life circumstances, making it a sensitive measure of population-level change.

Brevity and scalability: Two questions can be incorporated into virtually any survey instrument at negligible cost.

Self-anchoring validity: By asking respondents to define their own "best" and "worst," the scale respects individual heterogeneity in values and life circumstances.

Limitations and cautions include:

Context effects: The ladder questions are sensitive to whatever items immediately precede them in a survey, sometimes to a highly significant degree. For example, when political evaluation questions preceded the ladder items, the thriving rate among these respondents was 13 percentage points lower compared to when the ladder questions were not preceded by other questions in parallel samples (Newport, 2011). This is why Gallup consistently places the ladder questions first, and why researchers deploying the measure independently should do the same.

Macro-event sensitivity: Recessions, pandemics, natural disasters and other large systemic shocks can move the measure rapidly and substantially, often overwhelming any local interventions designed to improve the thriving rate. This is a feature of the measure's validity but a limitation for evaluators trying to attribute change to local interventions.

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Granularity limits: The two questions reveal a person's life position but not the functional determinants of that position. Sound wellbeing research ought to pair the LEI with questions about vital conditions in one's community and other elements that drive life evaluation individually (e.g., career, social, financial, community, physical and mental wellbeing).

Individual-level aggregation: The LEI is constructed from individual responses and aggregated to the population level. This approach does not directly capture relational, network-level and structural dimensions of collective wellbeing that may influence communities independent of individual self-reports (Roy et al., 2018).

Self-anchoring critique: Because respondents define their own "best possible life," individuals with limited exposure to different life possibilities may anchor lower than they would if their reference points expanded. Improvement in conditions can therefore sometimes produce an apparent decline in ratings as people revise their expectations upward. More generally, related unknowns include how some individuals may modify over time what any given rung represents to them, so while their life circumstances may be improving or declining, their self-placement on the ladder remains unchanged. Alternatively, they may change their placement over time amid no substantive changes in their lives. While these effects should be small in randomized large-population measurement, researchers should nevertheless recognize them.

Cross-sectional analyses: Many analyses using the LEI rely on cross-sectional data; causal inference about change over time requires longitudinal designs or quasi-experimental approaches.

Life expectancy integration: The LEI measures quality of life, not length of life. Large population thriving rates and population longevity are correlated but distinct constructs (Diener & Chan, 2011). Their interaction as a measure of "long, thriving lives" or "wellbeing-adjusted life years" remains an active area of research that emphasizes that while subjective wellbeing predicts longer and healthier aging, it is important not to conflate wellbeing with longevity itself (Steptoe et al., 2015).

Future directions in measurement research will likely address several of these limitations, including development of complementary collective wellbeing indicators, richer integration of the LEI with administrative data and longitudinal community designs that can more rigorously attribute change to specific interventions.

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Survey Methods

All surveys in this report were conducted with randomly selected adults aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

The 2026 estimates are based on three quarterly surveys conducted in February, May and August with a total of 15,178 respondents as a part of the probability-based Gallup Panel. For results based on this sample of national adults, the margin of sampling error is about ±1.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, design effect included. The 2025 estimates are based on four quarterly surveys conducted throughout the year with 22,125 respondents as part of the Gallup Panel. For results based on this sample of national adults, the margin of sampling error is about ±0.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, design effect included.

For the race, ethnicity and political identity division subgroups, the margin of error will be larger, typically ranging from ±1.0 to ±2.0 percentage points. Samples for 2020 to 2024 were also taken from the Gallup Panel with the following sample sizes:

YEAR	SAMPLE SIZE
2024	23,895
2023	21,372
2022	14,183
2021	42,936
2020	121,548

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The estimates for 2018 and 2019 are based on surveys conducted by mail and web with a random sample of 115,929 adults and 9,645 adults, respectively. The margin of sampling error is ±0.2 and ±0.7 percentage points, respectively, at the 95% confidence level, design effect included. About 80% of all completed surveys were done by mail in both years.

Prior years of measurement were based on telephone interviews conducted daily from Jan. 2-Dec. 30 of each year with roughly equally sized samples each month. Sample sizes from 2008 to 2017 were:

YEAR	SAMPLE SIZE
2017	160,498
2016	177,192
2015	177,281
2014	176,702
2013	178,067
2012	353,653
2011	353,492
2010	352,840
2009	353,849
2008	354,645

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The percentage of respondents interviewed by cellphone rose from 15% in 2008 to 70% by 2017, reflecting changes in American phone consumer habits. Additional minimum quotas by time zone and within region are included in the sampling approach. The margin of sampling error at the 95% confidence level is ±0.2 percentage points, design effect included.

Phone-based samples were weighted to correct for unequal selection probability, nonresponse, and double coverage of landline and cell users in the two sampling frames. They were also weighted to match the national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region, population density and phone status (cellphone only/landline only/both and cellphone mostly). Demographic weighting targets were based on the most recent Current Population Survey figures for the aged 18 and older U.S. population. All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting.

The means of data collection (e.g., web only versus mail/web versus phone) can result in differing estimates for some metrics in randomized large population polling. Gallup has extensively studied these effects and has determined that the thriving rate, the current life evaluation rate (when cut at 7 or higher) and the future life satisfaction rate (when cut at 8 or higher) are comparable across modes, thus effectively preserving past trending without the need for an adjustment due to the change in the means of data collection.

Comparisons of national weighted estimates from samples fielded during similar periods between the Gallup Panel and the Gallup National Health and Well-Being Index demonstrated highly convergent results with statistically insignificant differences.

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