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New statistics for old?—measuring the wellbeing of the UK

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Summary. Attempts to create measures of national wellbeing and progress have a long history. In the UK, they go back at least as far as the 1790s, with Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland*. More recently, worldwide interest has led to the creation of various indices seeking to go beyond familiar economic measures like gross domestic product. We review the 'Measuring national well-being' development programme of the UK's Office for National Statistics and explore some of the challenges which need to be faced to bring wider measures into use. These include the importance of getting the measures adopted as policy drivers, how to challenge the continuing dominance of economic measures, sustainability and environmental issues, international comparability and methodological statistical questions.

Keywords: Beyond gross domestic product; Progress; Public policy; Quantum of happiness; Sustainable development; Wellbeing

The following contribution was received in writing after the meeting.

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There has been a rapid deterioration in self-reported health in recent years with a doubling of the proportion of the population aged 16 years or over that were 'mostly dissatisfied' with their health between 2010–2011 and 2011–2012.

Self-reported health has continued to decline since the statistics used in Fig. 2 were released in March 2015. Only one aggregate figure was released in early 2016. It combined three of the categories. Just one mention of this was made in the most recent 2016 Office for National Statistics (ONS) 'measuring the quality of life' report:

'The proportion of people aged 16 and over in the UK who were somewhat, mostly or completely satisfied with their health was lower in the financial year ending 2014 (57.8%) than in the previous year (59.3%). The way in which people view their health is crucial to well-being.'

(Office for National Statistics, 2016).

As Table 2 shows, the latest (2013–2014) statistic is worse than any recorded since 2002 and lies well outside the range of confidence limits last published by the ONS in their 2015 release (58.8–59.8%). Self-reported health in the UK is deteriorating at an alarming rate with acceleration in that deterioration in the year 2011. In Dorling (2016) I used statistics collected by the British Household Panel Survey in the 1990s to show that health is overwhelmingly the most important short-term determinant of wellbeing. People can and do adapt to a deterioration in their health, but not when how they are having to live is making them, and especially those around them, ill.

Paul and David comment on John Sinclair, Jeremy Bentham, Herbert Spence, Lyndon Johnston, Robert Kennedy, Claus Moser, Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, Jean-Paul Fitoussi, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron (in that order). I do wonder whether the particular approach to studying happiness that tends to be promoted by senior politicians, statisticians and economists tells us more about what may have been unusual about this select group of people than about happiness. In very recent surveys the population of the UK has told us that their wellbeing is deteriorating in relation to what matters most—their health.

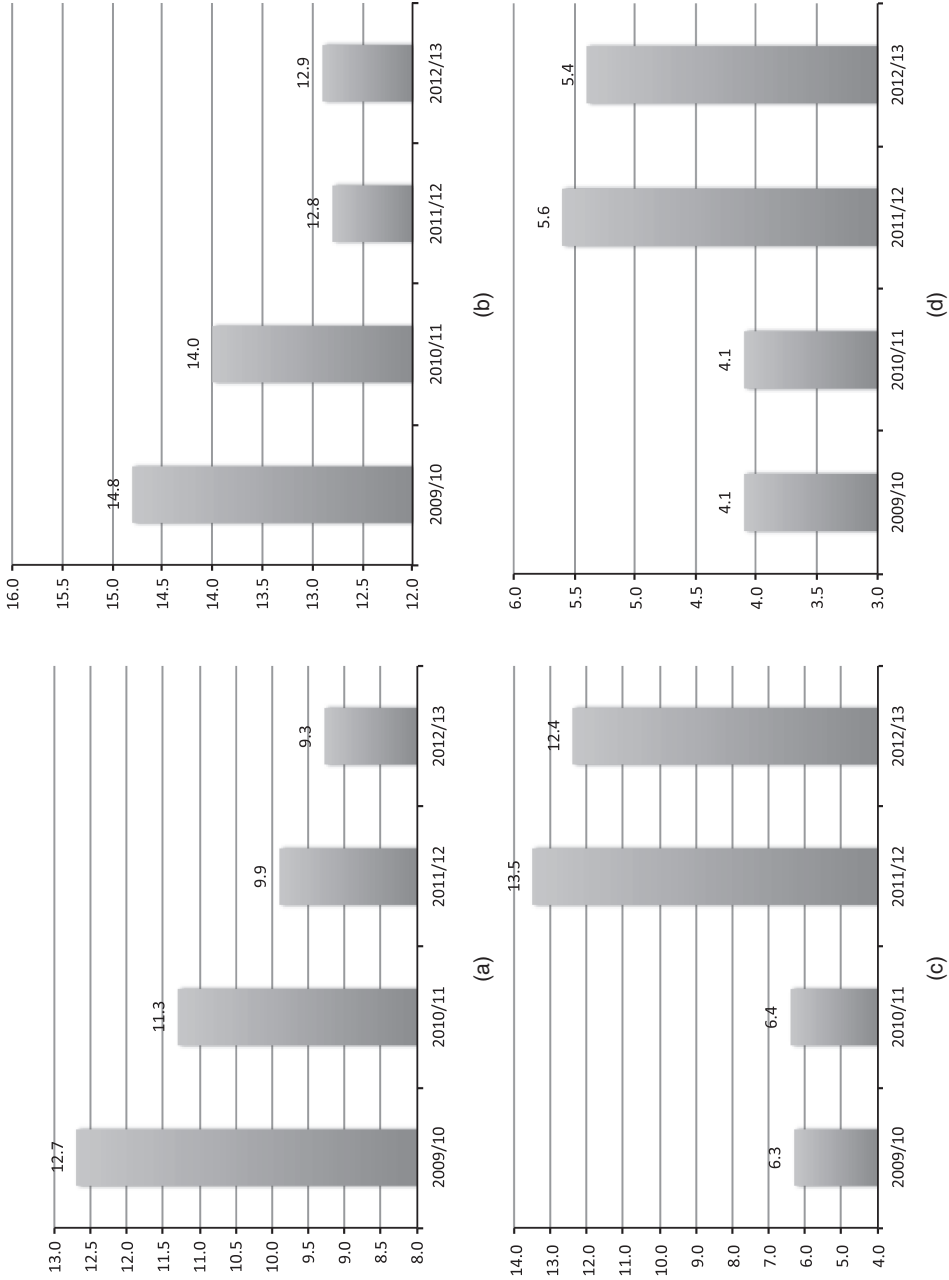


Fig. 2. Trends in self-reported health used by the ONS in wellbeing reporting (source: ONS, derived from the Understanding Society Survey (see Table 2 for details)): (a) people who are completely satisfied with their health (UK, %); (b) people who are somewhat satisfied with their health (UK, %); (c) people who are completely dissatisfied with their health (UK, %); (d) people who are mostly dissatisfied with their health (UK, %)

Table 2. UK national wellbeing measures, March 2015 release with the single comparable statistic from the March 2016 release added†

	<i>Results (%) for the following years:</i>												
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009–2010	2010–2011	2011–2012	2012–2013	2013–2014	
Completely satisfied	14.6	16.6	13.0	10.6	11.6	12.2	12.3	12.7	11.3	9.9	9.3	9.3	
Mostly satisfied	28.3	31.0	29.4	27.5	28.5	29.5	30.7	40.8	41.0	36.6	37.1	37.1	
Somewhat satisfied	23.9	23.2	24.7	25.5	25.8	25.6	27.3	14.8	14.0	12.8	12.9	12.9	
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	14.6	13.7	15.5	16.3	15.7	15.5	14.4	8.2	8.6	7.8	9.3	9.3	
Somewhat dissatisfied	10.0	8.3	9.4	10.4	10.2	10.3	8.9	13.0	14.5	13.8	13.6	13.6	
Mostly dissatisfied	4.6	3.9	4.5	5.2	4.8	4.1	3.6	6.3	6.4	13.5	12.4	12.4	
Completely dissatisfied	4.1	3.3	3.5	4.5	3.3	2.9	2.8	4.1	4.1	5.6	5.4	5.4	
<i>Somewhat, mostly or completely satisfied</i>	66.7	70.8	67.0	63.7	65.9	67.3	70.2	68.3	66.3	59.3	59.3	57.8	
Upper confidence interval ± 0.5	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	68.8	66.7	59.8	59.8	59.8	
Lower confidence interval ± 0.5	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	67.8	65.9	58.8	58.8	58.8	

†This measure has been assessed as showing no overall change between 2011–2012 and 2012–2013. It is assessed as having deteriorated between 2009–2010 and 2012–2013. Although these are longitudinal surveys, the data have been weighted for cross-sectional analysis. Comparisons can be made but caution needs to be taken. Source: Understanding Society, UK Office for National Statistics Household Longitudinal Study—as published by the ONS, but with some additional data. The 2013–2014 figure has been added from Office for National Statistics (2016). Note that the proportion has fallen further and that no breakdown is now published by the ONS. Although the questions on the surveys are similar the methodology has changed to such an extent that it is not possible to compare the new Understanding Society Survey figures with the earlier British Household Panel Survey figures.