



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
FACULTY OF ARTS
Department of Economics

Working Paper No. 2025-05

**The Happiness Crisis for Younger
Generations in Canada and
the United States: What is
Different and What is Not**

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June 2025

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The Happiness Crisis for Younger Generations in Canada and the United States: What is Different and What is Not

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June 25, 2025

Abstract

Using multiple Canadian and U.S. surveys over the past two decades, we find large and comparable declines in life satisfaction and other measures of subjective well-being among young Canadians and young Americans, specifically those below the age of 35. The timing of the decline is consistent, too, with the downward trend starting well before COVID-19, and picking up speed around the mid-2010s. The declines are the most dramatic for Gen Z. But Gen Y follows not far behind. There is no large gender difference, likely reflecting differing equally important challenges. We find substantial declines in all population segments when we divide the survey samples by household income, having a university degree or not, and geographic regions.

One notable finding is that in the U.S. those with household income between \$35k and \$75k a year reported a greater decline than, and has become indistinguishable from, those of lower incomes in terms of life satisfaction and self-assessed mental problems. Canadian in the middle income category, between \$40k and \$100k, retain a noticeable advantage in life satisfaction over those with lower incomes.

Another is that regions that started with a higher level of life satisfaction, such as the Atlantic and Prairie regions in Canada, the Mountain and West North Central census division in the U.S., fell harder than those in initially worse positions. A Canadian exception is Quebec, which started high and experienced the least, though still substantial, decline.

JEL: E24,H23,J64,J68.

Keywords: subjective well-being, generation, demographics

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1 Introduction and literature review

According to Helliwell et al. (2024) (WHR), younger generations in Canada and the U.S., including young adults, experienced a dramatic decline in their self-reported happiness over the past 20 years. The finding is based on Gallup World Polls' question on evaluation of life in general. Measured by changes in the average scores, younger Canadians and younger Americans rank just above their peers in Venezuela, Lebanon, and Afghanistan in a global listing of countries with the greatest falls in life evaluations from 2006/10 to 2021/23 (Statistical appendix, WHR 2024). These declines, much greater than those of older age groups, have turned a previously widely-prevalent U-shape age-happiness relationship, which features a "midlife crisis," into a crisis for the young, who have displaced the middle-aged to become the least happy groups in both countries. While well suited for providing national snapshots, the Gallup World Poll has a survey sample of 1,000 respondents per country per year, too small for detailed demographic, socio-economic, and geographic breakdowns. This makes it difficult to conduct comprehensive comparisons that go beyond the national aggregate statistics.

An in-depth comparison between Canada and U.S. can provide both academic and policy insights. Canada and the United States share many common features of geography, language, culture, and broad economic climates, yet still have many crucial differences in political systems, healthcare, immigration, and economic growth. This allows researchers a chance to better understand some of the social-economic factors underpinning the quality of life. One example of the differences is the modest advantage that the U.S. has had in the growth of real GDP, to the tune of 0.7%-point difference a year between 2015 and 2025 (2.5% vs Canada's 1.8%). There is also the very large difference in wealth creation in the equity market, in which the U.S. S&P500 index rose by 380% from 2005, while the Canadian SP/TSX composite index rose by just 140%.

From a policy perspective, it is useful to understand the nature of the falling happiness of younger American and Canadians, who will determine the political future of the two countries. Take for example, a January 2025 Ipsos poll finds that younger Canadians are much more open to the idea of becoming the 51st state of the U.S. than are older Canadians.¹ These respondents were mainly

¹Ipsos, January 2025, "Four in ten (43%) Canadians age 18-34 would vote to be American if citizenship and conversion of assets to USD guaranteed". In comparison, only 33% of Canadian age 35-54, and 17% of those age 55+ said they would vote yes. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/43-percent-canadians-would-vote-be-american-if>

in the prairie provinces, which we show later to be parts of Canada with the largest decreases in life satisfaction. This might have reflected some degree of rose-tinted glasses effect, judged by the comparable decline in perceived quality of life of their southern neighbours. Our research in this paper contributes by providing a detailed documentation and comparison of young Canadians and Americans’ self-assessed well-being over the past two decades, using large Canadian and U.S. surveys to firmly establish the commonality and differences between the two countries, both at the aggregate level and in different segments of the populations.

In the existing literature, several recent working papers, some using exceptionally large surveys in the U.S. and in Canada, have reported findings of declines in younger generations’ well-being (Twenge and Blanchflower, 2025; Huang et al., 2025; Blanchflower et al., 2024). But there have been no studies that provide detailed comparison between Canada and the U.S. focusing on shared features and differences, especially not across population segments. Twenge and Blanchflower (2025) report declining subjective well-being among young adults in six English-speaking countries including the U.S. and Canada. Their analysis shows a picture, consistent across the six countries, of young adults becoming “less happy and less satisfied with their lives”. For Canada, their analysis uses the Gallup World Poll and the World Values survey; both have small sample sizes that do not provide enough statistical power to compare sub-populations. Blanchflower et al. (2024) focus on measures of mental health and cover 34 countries including U.S. and Canada. Among their findings the most relevant to us is that younger females in Canada and the U.S. report greater declines in mental health than do other groups. Here we plan to go beyond the gender split, and will also divide young people by birth cohort, income, education, and geography. We will also have a sharper focus on Canada-US comparisons, which is lacking in both papers cited earlier. Another study closely related to ours is Huang et al. (2025), which focuses on Canada using several large Statistics Canada surveys. They find a similar pattern of absolute and relative declines in younger Canadians’ subjective well-being, especially since the mid-2010s, but do not compare Canada against the U.S.

Multiple Statistics Canada publications have also highlighted the decline of younger Canadian’s well-being, including Garriguet (2021), who reports a decline in the self-reported mental health of youth between 2003 and 2020, particularly among females. More recently, Statistics Canada (2023) reports

citizenship-and-conversion-assets-usd-guaranteed

that “hopefulness declined among young Canadians” from 2016 to 2021/2022, and that fewer young adults reported high levels of life satisfaction in 2022 than in 2021.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the multiple surveys and their well-being measures that we will use. Section 3 presents the empirical findings in three steps, following a “what and when”, “who” and “where” flow of presentation. The “what and when” subsection looks at what has happened to younger Canadians’ and Americans’ well-being, and the timing of the change. The “who” subsection divide the younger generations by birth cohort, gender, income and educational attainment. The “where” section focuses on geographic regions. Section 4 summarizes the main findings, and briefly discusses their implications.

2 Surveys and their measures of well-being

We compare Canada and the U.S. using the Gallup World Poll (GWP) and a variety of larger surveys. In the Gallup World Poll, Canadian and U.S. survey respondents are asked the same life evaluation question with identical wording over the same time period of time. The survey asks the evaluation question right at the beginning, just after some initial screening questions and informed consent, thereby reducing conditioning and framing effects equally in both countries. All these features make the comparison between Canada and U.S. over time as clean as possible. The drawback of GWP is its limited sample size. By pooling together survey years, we can deal with the problem to some extent. But for more detailed comparison involving population sub-groups, we need to use larger surveys. Table 1 list the surveys we will use in this study, listing key information such as sample size, survey years and measures of well-being. The exact wording of the well-being measures is shown in the table footnote. Some of the surveys, conducted by national statistical and health agencies, are very large in size, and can ensure statistical precision even when we look at small segments of the population.

For Canada, we will use six themes of the General Social Survey, namely the Time Use survey, the Victimization Survey, the Social Networks/Identity survey, the Giving, Volunteering and Participating survey, the Family survey and the Caregiving and Care Receiving survey. Each of the GSS themes provides a different basis for comparisons, given the vastly different sets of questions before its question on life satisfaction, and thus the substantial survey-content

effects (Huang et al., 2025; Bonikowska et al., 2014). We regard them as six different surveys. The survey themes follow a rotation schedule with the same theme conducted every 5 or so years. As a result, we can compare surveys of the same theme that are conducted several years apart. The GSS surveys each covers about 20,000 respondents a year.

For the US, we have two large surveys: the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) from CDC and the Gallup-Healthways Well-being Index (GHWI) conducted by the Gallup Organization. The BRFSS interviews more than 350,000 American adults (age 18 and over) a year in recent years. It has a question on life satisfaction with 4 response categories (Very satisfied, Satisfied, Dissatisfied, and Very dissatisfied). The BRFSS started including the question from 2005 on, stopped asking it on a large scale between 2011 and 2021, and resumed doing so in 2022 and 2023 (these are the most recent years of data available for public use). To provide information to partially fill the 2011-2021 gap, we use a second measure that has better availability over time, namely the number of days in the past 30 days when “your mental health [was] not good” due to “stress, depression, and problems with emotions”. The average number of bad-mental health days is used in Helliwell and Huang (2014) as one of the key well-being measure. It is also used in Blanchflower et al. (2024) to construct their measure of “despair”.

The Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index is a daily-tracking survey of U.S. residents between 2008 and 2019. It interviews about 1,000 adults every day, though the sample size become much smaller in 2018 and 2019 when the survey ended. The survey has the same 11-point Cantril ladder question as in the Gallup World Poll. We drop the 2008 and 2009 surveys due to the presence of politically oriented questions before the Cantril ladder question in those two years, which creates large context effects for the measure of life evaluation (Deaton and Stone, 2016). The Gallup Organization states in its Methodology document that the effect “compromised the interpretation of longitudinal trends on the ladder mean”.²

²According to the section “Frequently Asked Questions For Analysis” in the Gallup Organization’s Gallup Daily Methodology (July 2015), the presence of those political questions creates a “Life Evaluation context effect phenomenon” in that “[p]olitically oriented questions preceding the [Cantril Scale questions] that appeared on Gallup surveys in 2008 and early 2009 influenced respondents’ answers to the Cantril Scale questions.”

Table 1: Surveys and their measures of well-being

Survey	Sample size per year	Years used	Measure
GWP - Canada	≈1,000	2005 - 2024	Cantril ladder (0-10)
Canadian GSS	≈20,000	2005 - 2022	life satisfaction (1-10, and 0-10)
	Time Use: 2005, 2010, 2015, 2022		
	Victimization: 2009, 2014, 2019		
	Social Networks/Identity (SN/I): 2008, 2013, 2020		
	Giving, Volunteering and Participating (GVP): 2013, 2018		
	Family: 2006, 2011, 2017		
	Caregiving and Care Receiving (Care): 2012, 2018		
GWP - U.S.	≈1,000	2006 - 2024	Cantril ladder (0-10)
BRFSS	≈350,000	2005 - 2023	life satisfaction (1-4), and days when mental health is not good
GHWI	≈350,000, smaller in 2018-19	2010 - 2019	Cantril ladder (0-10)

Note: (1) GWP stands for Gallup World Poll, GSS stands for General Social Survey, BRFSS stands for Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. GHWI stands for Gallup-Heathway Well-being Index.

(2) Question wording:

GWP and GHWI Cantril ladder (0-10): “Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 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?”

GSS life satisfaction from 2008-2010: Using a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means “Very dissatisfied” and 10 means “Very satisfied”, how do you feel about your life as a whole right now? From 2011 on, the scale changes from 0 to 10, and the words “right now” are removed.

BRFSS mental health question: “Now thinking about your mental health, which includes stress, depression, and problems with emotions, for how many days during the past 30 days was your mental health not good?”

BRFSS life satisfaction: “In general, how satisfied are you with your life? Are you ... 1 Very satisfied 2 Satisfied 3 Dissatisfied 4 Very dissatisfied”

3 Empirical findings

3.1 What happened to subjective well-being of young Canadians and Americans, and when?

3.1.1 Canada and U.S. in GWP

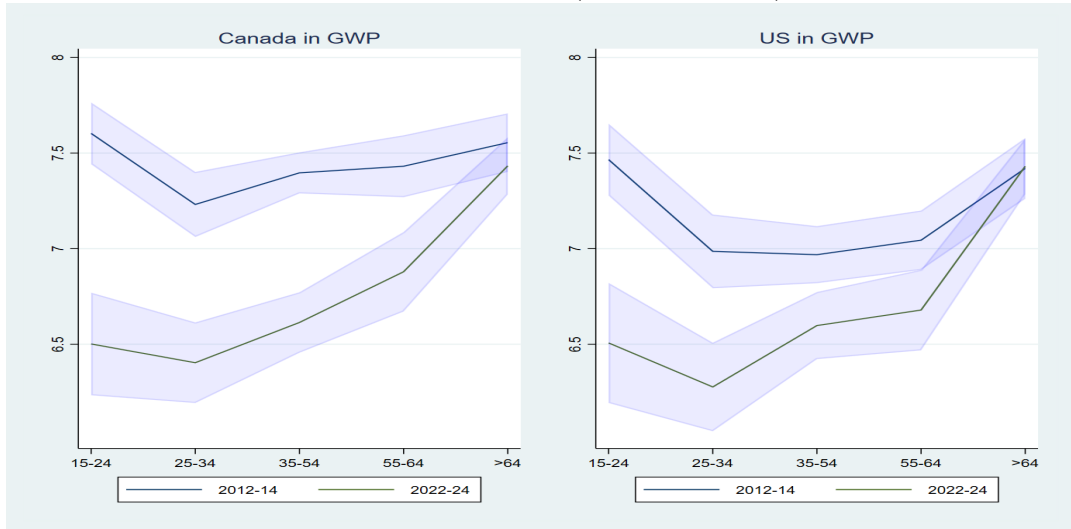
We start with the GWP because it permits the most direct comparison between Canada and the U.S. with its identical survey setting and well-being measure. Figure 1 plots average Cantril ladder scores on the y axis and five age brackets on the x axis (age 15-24, 25-34, 35-54, 55-64, and 65 and above), therefore showing the younger generations' absolute and relative levels of life evaluation. A well-established finding in the earlier literature is the existence of a U-shape pattern, whereby subjective well-being starts at a high level at young age, falls into a low of "midlife crisis," before picking up again at or near the retirement age (see Blanchflower and Graham (2022), Helliwell et al. (2019), and most recently Oparina et al. (2025)).

Figure 1 compares the age-happiness curves in Canada and the U.S. at different points in time, pitting the 2012-2014 period against 2022-2024 period. In the earlier period, there was a clear U shape in both countries: the youngest (15-24) and the oldest (65 and over) age groups reported higher life evaluations than the middle-aged groups. In the 2022-2024 period, however, the U shape disappears, driven by large declines of the younger age groups, who have now replaced the middle-aged groups to become the least happy. The 65-and-over age group, on the other hand, stays on top with barely any changes. Instead of a U, we now have a steep mountain to climb, with life beginning at the valley, rising gradually until peaking at the retirement age.

Figure 2 shows the full time series focusing on the two youngest age groups (namely the 15-24 and the 25-34 groups). We observed from Figure 1 that the two age groups follow similar movements over time, and therefore collapsing them into one single age group of 15-34 to simplifying the presentation. The figure shows that in both countries a substantial decline happened around the mid-2010s.

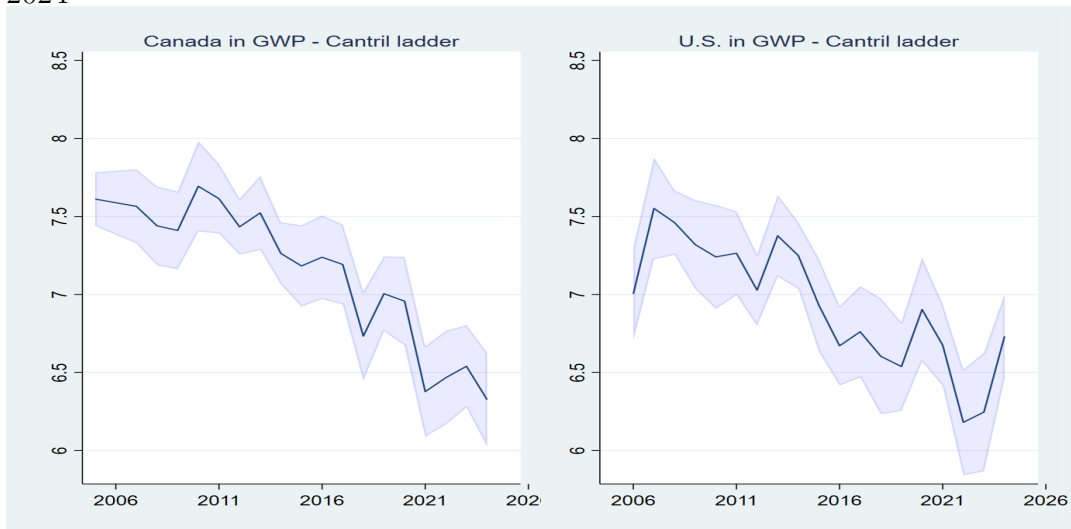
Next we look at the distributions of Cantril-ladder responses. Table 2 show the shares of responses that we consider as extremes: those indicating misery (0-4) at one end and those indicating jubilation (9-10) at the other. The choice of 0-4 as misery is justified by the small shares that these responses commanded in the earlier period. Canada starts with misery being reported by only 4.7% in

Figure 1: Changes in age-happiness (Cantril ladder) curves in GWP



Notes: The well-being measure here is average Cantril ladder, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10. The shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 2: Time series of average Cantril ladder in GWP; below-35 only; 2005-2024



Notes: The well-being measure here is average Cantril ladder, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10. The shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals. Canadian data starts from 2005. U.S. data start from 2006. Both end in 2024.

the 2012-14 period, but that share increases to 14.4% in the 2020-24, a 3-fold increase. The U.S. starts from a worse position with 9.5% of the respondents in misery, which increases to 17.4% in 2022-24. Canada is still in a better position, but the gap has narrowed. Looking at the jubilance end of the distribution (9 and 10), we observe that Canada starts with a share 22% in 2012-2014, which drops to 11% ten years later. In the U.S. the share falls from 23% to 10%.

Table 2: Changes in shares of very-low evaluations (0-4) and very-high evaluations (9-10) in GWP; below-35 only

Country	Periods	Misery		Jubilance	
		Earlier	Recent	Earlier	Recent
Canada	2012-14 vs 2022-24	4.7	14.4	21.6	11.0
U.S.	2012-14 vs 2022-24	9.5	17.4	22.6	10.1

To summarize, we made three observations from the GWP for both Canada and the U.S. First, the younger age groups have experienced substantial declines in their subjective well-being, both in absolute terms and relative to the rest of the population. Second, the decline started before COVID, picking up speed around the mid-2010s. Third, the decline is characterized by a substantial rise in misery and a large fall in jubilance.

3.1.2 Canada in GSS, and US in BRFSS and GHWI

Here we look at large surveys in Canada and the U.S., to see if those other surveys yield observations consistent with the GWP. We begin with Canadian data, specifically the six themes of the GSS and its measure of life satisfaction. Figure 3 again uses the shifting and tilting of the age-happiness curves to describe the life-satisfaction changes of the 5 age groups. It has six panels, one for each of the six different themes, each comparing the most recent survey against the earlier survey that has the same theme. The exact timing of comparisons differs depending on themes, but in general the most recent waves are conducted between 2017 and 2022, while the earlier waves are conducted between 2011-2015. As noted in Huang et al. (2025), the six different themes do not always have the same age-happiness relationships, because different survey contents before the life satisfaction question remind older and younger people of

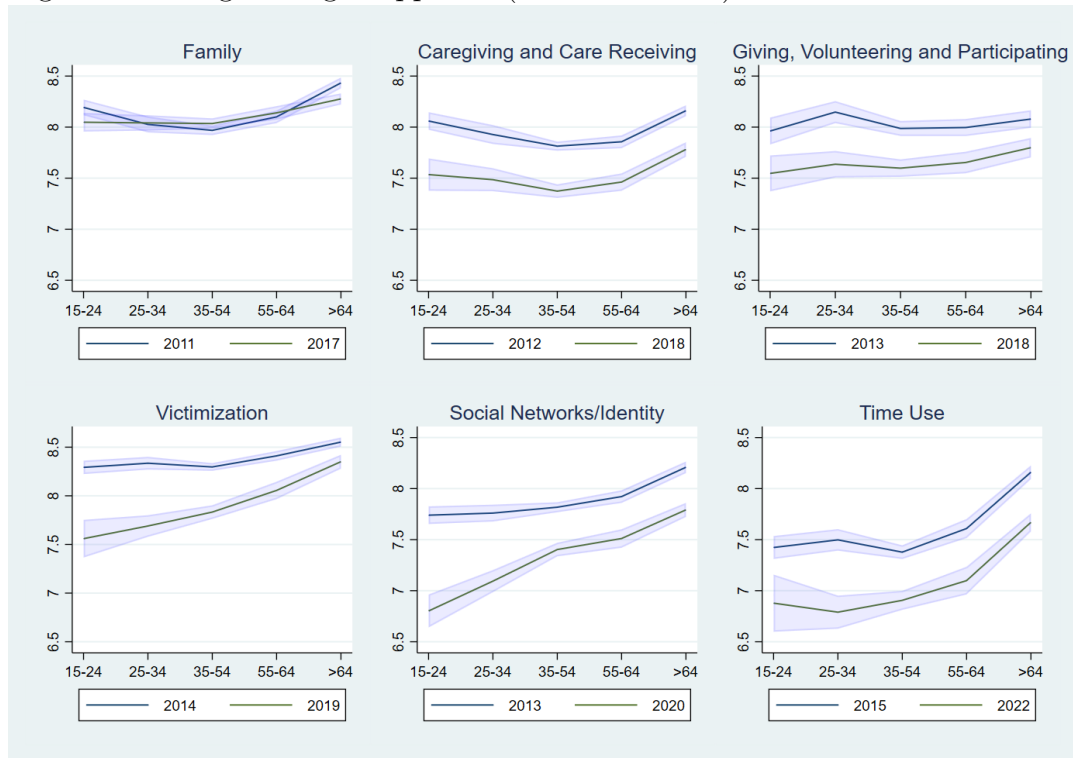
their advantages and concerns.³ Yet even with these theme-based differences, there is clear evidence of absolute and relative decline of the young, especially in the Victimization surveys (2019 vs 2014), Social Networks/Identity surveys (2020 vs 2013) and Time Use surveys (2022 vs 2015). Two other surveys show evidence of absolute decline but no obvious relative decline. But none of the six surveys show that the younger are getting relatively happier compared to the older age groups. So on balance the evidence strongly indicates a relative decline of younger Canadian’s survey well-being compared to older Canadians.

Next we use Figure 4 to examine the time line of the decline. The figure shows the full time series of average life satisfaction from the GSS for Canadians below the age of 35. With only one line to plot, we fit all the six GSS themes in a single panel using theme lines to connect comparable pairs (different rounds of the survey with the same theme). The figure shows that the more substantial declines in the group’s life satisfaction happened around the mid 2010s, consistent with earlier observations from the GWP.

We now move to the U.S. Figure 5 plots the well-being by age curves using three different measures from the two U.S. surveys. From the GWHI we have the average Cantril ladder. From the BRFSS we show first the proportion of respondents saying they are “very satisfied” with life, and then the average number of bad mental health days in the past 30 days. Again we focus on changes over time in the age-well being curves. Due to data constraints, the exact years of comparison differ. But we always compare the most recent years available against earlier years around the mid 2010s (if not available as in the case of life satisfaction, we use the early-2010s). Here the picture is unambiguous. All three well-being measures show an absolute and relative decline of young Americans. In the GWHI, the two youngest age groups reported a higher average Cantril ladder than the middle age groups in 2012-2014. By 2018-19 they become the least happy groups. In the BRFSS, the share of “very satisfied” falls from 40% to about 27% among the 18-24 age group, and from 45% to 35% among 25-34 group, over the 10-year period from 2009-2010 to 2022-23. Similarly, these youngest age groups see a large increase in the aver-

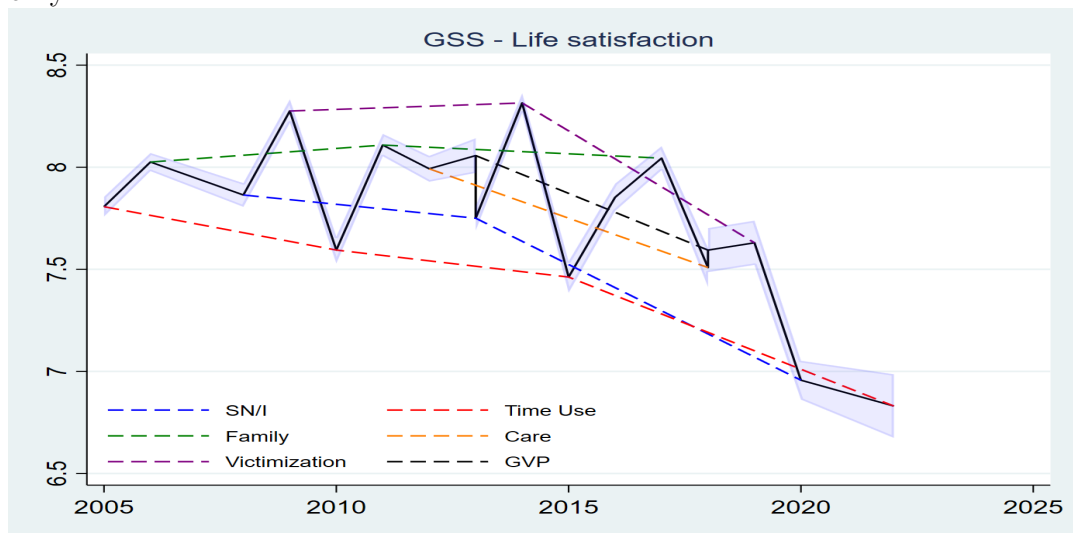
³To illustrate, Time Use and Social Networks/Identify themes tend to show higher life satisfaction for the old and lower satisfaction for the young, while Caregiving and Care Receiving, as well as the Giving, Volunteering, and Participating tend to have happier younger age groups. Perhaps different survey contents remind people of their advantages and concerns. The younger age groups may be facing a greater time pressure, more socially anxious but are also more socially engaged at the same time, and less likely to worry about healthcare. For older age groups, the opposite is true, thus leading to the different age-happiness relationship across themes.

Figure 3: Changes in age-happiness (life satisfaction) curves in Canadian GSS



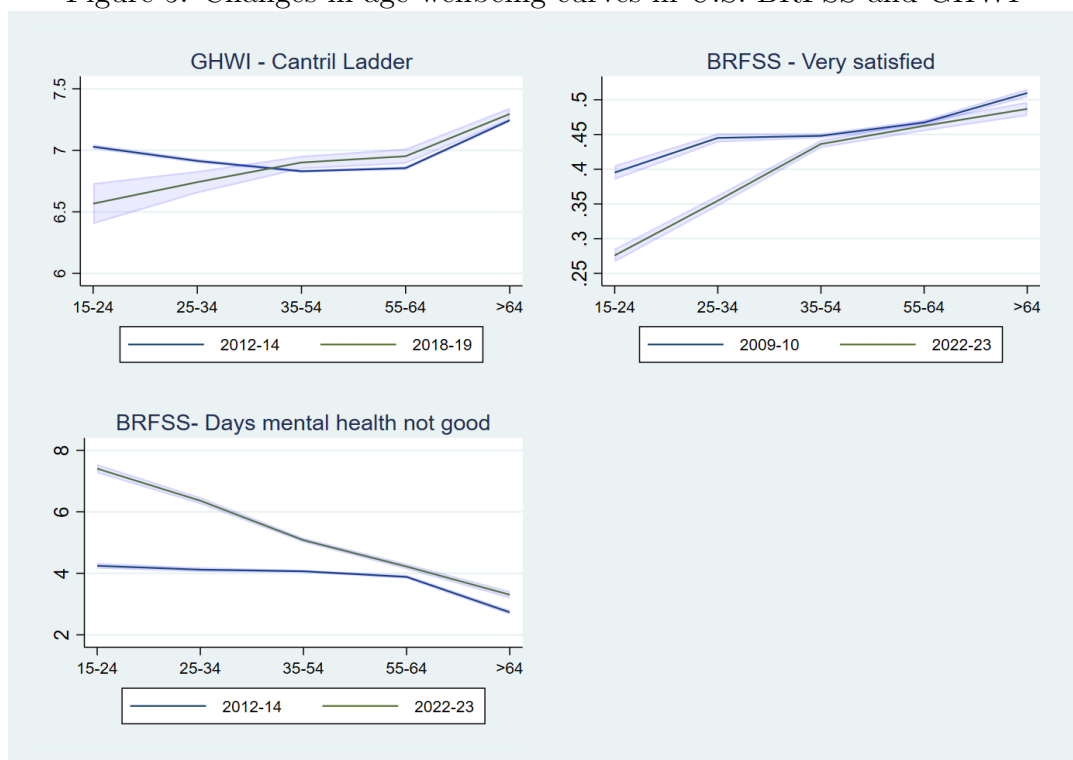
Notes: 1) The well-being measure is average life satisfaction, which has an 11-point scale from 0 to 10. Each of the GSS panels has a heading that indicates the theme of the survey. For example, the “Victimization” panel shows average life satisfaction from Victimization theme of the GSS. The GSS have a schedule of rotating themes, with the same theme asked every 5 or so years. Each of the panels shows two rounds of surveys that have the same theme. 2) The shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4: Time series of average life satisfaction in Canadian GSS; below-35 only



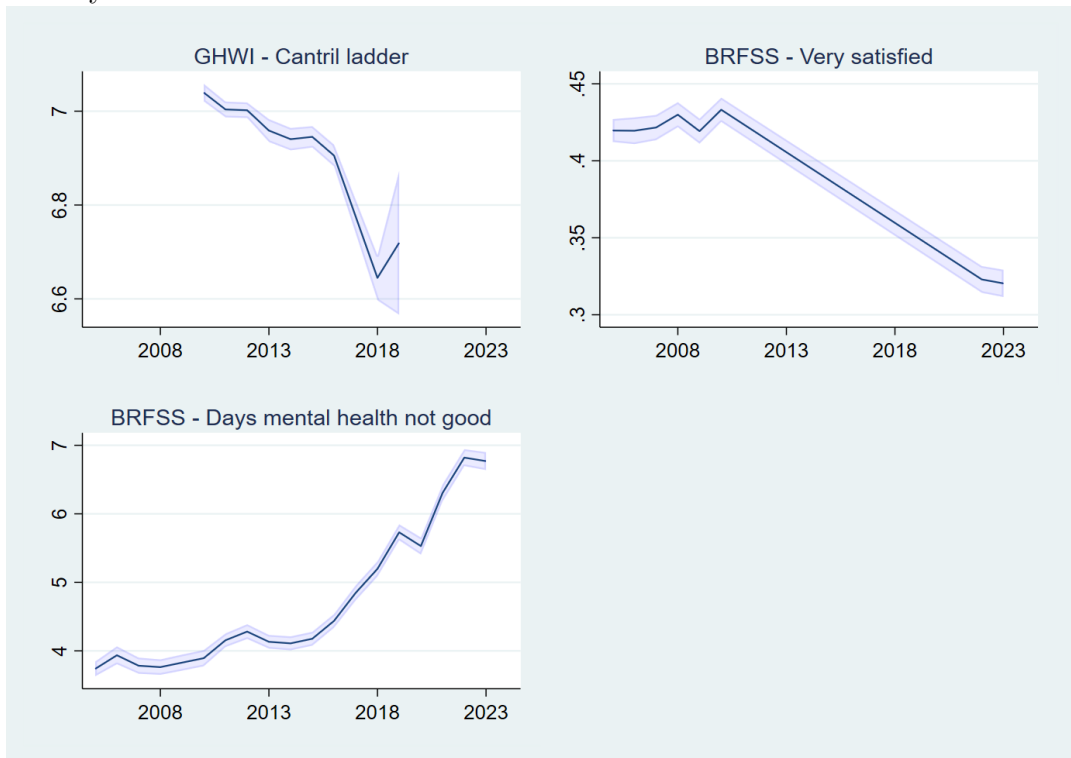
Notes: The well-being measure here is average life satisfaction with 11 points, from 0 to 10. The shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals. The GSS has a schedule of rotating themes, with the same theme asked every 5 or so years. We use dotted lines to connect different rounds that have the same theme. Different colors of the dotted lines indicate different themes. SN/I is Social Network/Identity, GVP is Giving, Volunteering and Participating. Other theme names are self-explanatory.

Figure 5: Changes in age-wellbeing curves in U.S. BRFSS and GHWI



Notes: The panel “GHWI - Cantril ladder” shows average Cantril ladder from GHWI, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10. “BRFSS - Very satisfied” shows the share of population who stated that they are “very satisfied” in life in BRFSS. “BRFSS - Days mental health not good” shows the average number of days when “mental health” was “not good” in the past 30 days, also from BRFSS.

Figure 6: Time series of well-being measures in U.S. BRFSS and GHWI; below-35 only



Notes: 1) “GHWI - Cantril ladder” shows average Cantril ladder in GHWI, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10. “BRFSS - Very satisfied” shows the share of population who stated that they are “very satisfied” in life in BRFSS. “BRFSS - Days mental health not good” shows the average number of days when “mental health” was “not good” in the past 30 days. 2). The times series of “BRFSS - Very satisfied” have missing years between 2011 and 2021, thus the straight line. 3). The sample size of GHWI became smaller in 2018 and more so in 2019, its last year, thus greater standard errors and the widening of confidence intervals in 2018 and 2019.

age number of bad-mental health days from 2012-14 to 2022-23, rising from 4 days a month to over 7 days a month among the 18-24 group, from 4 to over 6 days among the 25-34 group. In contrast, the oldest two age groups (55-64 and 65 and above) are barely changed over period across all the three measures. The relative decline is therefore dramatic and clear. This may not be a picture that those 43% young Canadians had in mind when they responded positively to the Ipsos survey question about voting to become Americans.

Figure 6 uses the full time series to examine when the decline happened. The BRFSS's life satisfaction has a gap between 2011 and 2021, so it is not very useful to tell us the timing. But it still carries valuable information showing that before 2010, there is little evidence of a decline. So the decline likely happened after that. The GHWI, with its data from 2010 to 2019, fill in a large part of that gap. It shows a clear downward trend from 2010 on, followed by a sudden pick up of the speed around the mid 2010s. The sudden pick up around mid 2010s is consistent with the GWP observation. In the GWP, however, there is no evidence of decline between 2010 and 2015. Given the much larger size of the GHWI and conversely the much broader confidence intervals in the GWP time series, the balance of evidence is favour of the GHWI observation that a decline in the Cantril ladder happened before the mid-2010s. Further support comes from the BRFSS time series on the average number of days with bad mental health. It shows a deterioration of mental health from 2010 and 2012, followed by some small improvement between 2013 and 2014, then a large worsening starting after 2015.

Moving on to distributions instead of just averages, Table 3 shows the shares of responses that we consider as extreme. For Canada's GSS, we use 0-4 on a 11-point scale life satisfaction question as a measure of misery. In the GWP, the share of misery increased by 10 percentage points over the past 10 years. Here with the GSS, we compare the mostly recently conducted survey against an earlier survey, usually 5 to 7 years ago, that has the same theme. We observe a 6.5 percentage point increase in the Time Use survey, and a 6.4 percentage point increase in the Social Network/Identity, and a 4.5 percentage point increase in the Victimization survey (a drastic increase considering that the initial level was only 1.8%). On the opposite end of the distribution is jubilation (9 and 10). Initial levels differ, likely reflect GSS's substantial survey-content effect as described in Bonikowska et al. (2014). But regardless, the shares of these very-high responses fall across the board over time, by about 9 percentages points in Time Use survey, 10 percentage points in the Giving, Volunteering and Par-

Table 3: Changes in shares of extreme responses in GSS, GHWI, and BRFSS

Survey	Periods	Misery		Jubillance	
		Earlier	Recent	Earlier	Recent
Canada GSS					
Family	2011 vs 2017	2.0	2.4	40.8	38.6
Caregiving and Care Receiving	2012 vs 2018	2.4	6.4	35.8	28.5
Giving, Volunteering and Participating	2013 vs 2018	2.4	5.0	38.5	28.4
Victimization	2014 vs 2019	1.8	6.3	46.3	33.4
Social Networks/Identity	2013 vs 2020	4.6	11.0	32.3	19.7
Time Use	2015 vs 2022	4.9	11.4	24.4	15.8
U.S.					
GHWI - Cantril ladder	2012-14 vs 2018-19	8.5	11.5	17.4	13.0
BRFSS - Days mental health not good	2012-14 vs 2023	8.3	14.2	57.8	40.8
BRFSS - Satisfaction with life	2008-10 vs 2023	5.6	8.4	42.7	32.0

Notes: For GSS, we define misery as reporting life satisfaction between 0 and 4, on a 0-10 point scale. For Cantril ladder in GHWI, misery is 0-4, jubillance is 9-10. For BRFSS - Days mental health not good, we define misery as reporting 20-30 days of bad mental health days out of the past 30. Jubillance is defined as reporting 0 day. For BRFSS life satisfaction, misery is “Dissatisfied” & “Very dissatisfied”, jubillance is “Very satisfied”.

ticipating, and 13 points in Social Network/Identity Surveys and Victimization surveys (2014 to 2019). Taking simple averages across all the 6 themes, we can report an average of 2.4-fold increase in misery, and an average of 26% (in proportion) decline in jubillance.

We make similar observations in the U.S. (the lower panel of Table 3). In the BRFSS, the share of respondents reporting 20 or more days, out of the past 30, of bad mental health rises from 8.3% in 2012-14 to 14.2% in 2023, while the share reporting total absence of bad-mental health days declines from 58% to 41%. Also in the BRFSS, the share reporting “very satisfied” with life drops from 43% to 32%, while the share reporting “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” increases from 5.6% to 8.4%. The GHWI, covering up to 2019, also shows rises in very-low responses for Cantril ladder, and decline in shares of very-high responses .

To summarize, the larger surveys in Canada and the U.S. confirm the main observations from the smaller GWP, in the absolute and relative decline of younger generations’ survey well-being, in the speeding up of the decline around the mid-2010s, the rise of misery, and in the decline of jubillance. These are population-wide observations, next we move on to more detailed examination by population segments, relying mostly on the larger Canadian and U.S. surveys.

3.2 Canada vs U.S., by birth cohort and gender

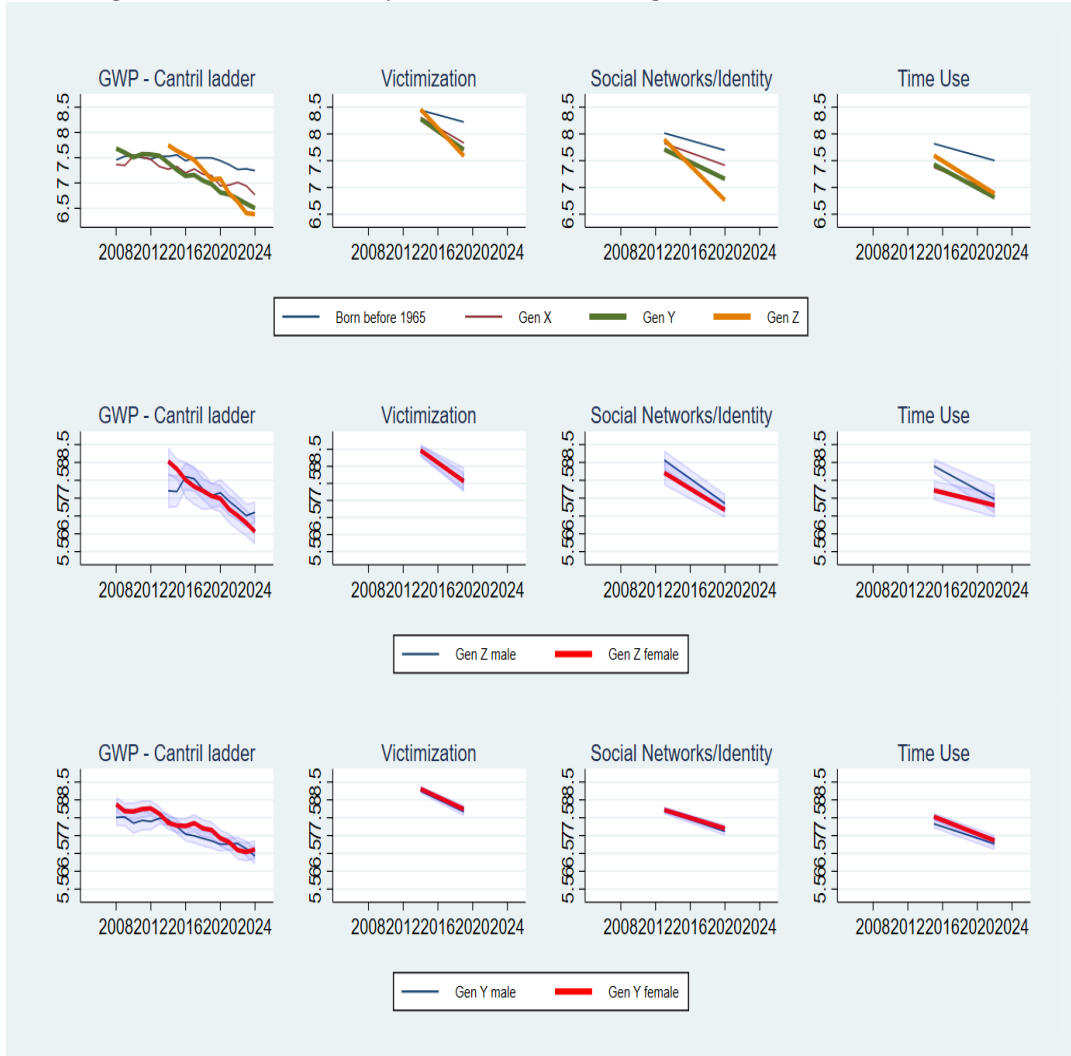
Next we explore potential differences by birth cohort and gender. First we break down the population into four broad cohorts: Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012), Gen Y (born between 1981 and 1996, also known as Millennials), Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980), and Boomers and older (those born before 1965). Given the intense interest in potential differential impacts of social media on younger males and females (Twenge et al., 2018; Twenge, 2020; Haidt, 2024), we further split Gen Z and Gen Y by gender. There are large differences in sample size across surveys. For the particularly small GWP, we use 3-year averaging to increase our statistical precision. Each point on the GWP trajectories is therefore the average of current and previous two years. The trajectories are shown in Figure 7 and 8, for Canada and the U.S. respectively. We note that the Gen Z data can only begin from more recent years because in earlier years they were still below the age coverage of our surveys (the minimum age is 15 for GSS, and 18 for BRFSS and GHWI). As a result, there are only three themes of the Canadian GSS that have the Gen Z time series.⁴

Figure 7, showing the Canadian data, has four panels on its top row, respectively showing comparisons from the GWP, the GSS Victimization, Social network/Identity and Time-Use surveys. They all show a clear picture of the Gen Z leading the decline, and Gen Y following not far behind, while Boomers and older exhibiting the least decline by a substantial margin. The second row shows Gen Z splits by gender, the third row shows Gen Y splits by gender. They all show similar degree of decline by males and females, with the 95% confidence intervals substantially overlap in three of the four survey, indicating a lack of detectable gender differences.

The matching US findings are presented in Figure 8. It too has four panels in each row, showing respectively the average Cantril ladder from the GWP, the same measure from the GHWI, the share of respondents indicating they are “very satisfied” with life, and the average number of bad-mental health days from BRFSS. The BRFSS life-satisfaction measure has limited availability for Gen Z because of the gap years from 2011 to 2021. But the BRFSS does have

⁴The GSS Family theme, for example, has its earlier round in 2011. So even though it has Gen Z respondents in its 2017 survey, it is missing the 2011 information to make a comparison over time. The Giving, Volunteering and Participating and Caregiving and Care Receiving themes are missing Gen Z comparisons as well, because we maintain a minimum cell size threshold when requesting data from the Research Data Centre (RDC) for confidentiality reasons. Thus we have to drop Gen Z observations in these surveys’ earlier years.

Figure 7: Canadians by birth cohort and gender, in GWP and GSS



Notes: “GWP - Cantril ladder” shows average Cantril ladder, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10. All the other panels show average life satisfaction, also on a scale from 0 to 10, from the GSS. Each of the GSS panels has a heading that indicate the theme of the survey. For example, the “Victimization” panel shows average life satisfaction from Victimization theme of the GSS. The GSS have a schedule of rotating themes, with the same theme asked every 5 or so years. We use straight lines to connect different rounds of the same theme.

Figure 8: U.S. by birth cohort and gender



Notes: 1) “GWP - Cantril ladder” and “GHWI - Cantril ladder” shows average Cantril ladder, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10, from GWP and GHWI. “BRFSS - Very satisfied” shows the share of population who stated that they are “very satisfied” in life in BRFSS. “BRFSS - Days mental health not good” shows the average number of days when “mental health” was “not good” in the past 30 days. 2). The times series of “BRFSS - Very satisfied” have missing years between 2011 and 2021, thus the straight line. 3). The sample size of GHWI became smaller in 2018 and more so in 2019, its last year, thus greater standard errors and the widening of confidence intervals in 2018 and 2019.

the alternative measure, namely the number of bad-mental health days, to fill in the gap and thus to supplement the picture. Here we also note that in BRFSS we define birth cohort based on age brackets instead of exact age. But the approximation error should be small because the BRFSS brackets are finely defined with mostly a 5-year interval. Again the second and the third rows of Figure 8 show the gender split for Gen Z and Gen Y.

The U.S. figures depict a similar picture as that for Canada, showing that Gen Z leads the decline, with Gen Y following not far behind. Boomers and older are remarkably resilient, and there is no substantial gender difference for Gen Z or Gen Y. All of these features match the Canadian patterns. The fact that Gen Z experienced a large decline in subjective well-being and mental health has been widely documented (Haidt, 2024; Twenge et al., 2018). The decline among Gen Y, however, is less explored. As argued in Huang et al. (2025), the fact that the happiness crisis spread beyond Gen Z calls for a better understanding about the causes of the happiness crisis beyond exposure to smart phones and social media during formative years. We should also examine other economic and social causes like the impact of the Great Recession, the subsequent slow down, challenges in the labour market, housing affordability, and the subsequent cost-of-living squeeze. Many of these have greater impact on younger generations (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011; Ganson et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2025). The lack of gender differences for Gen Y and Gen Z suggest that the negative impact of social media may not be as gender biased as sometimes thought, and calls attention to the challenges faced by young Canadian and American boys and young men over recent decades, including the higher risk of lagging behind in schools (Fortin et al., 2015), the influence of online “manosphere” (Ging, 2019), as well as labour-market challenges from the decline of some traditionally male-dominated industries (Autor et al., 2019). COVID-19 disruptions likely play a role (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2022). But the fact that the significant declines all preceded COVID by several years, a finding that is solidly reaffirmed across multiple surveys and measures, raises question about COVID’s relative importance in the happiness crisis for young people in Canada and the U.S.

3.3 Canada vs U.S., by income group and education

This sub-section segments young Canadians and Americans by income and education attainment. Figures 9 and 10 present the well-being trajectories in Canada and U.S. by three income groups: low, middle and higher household

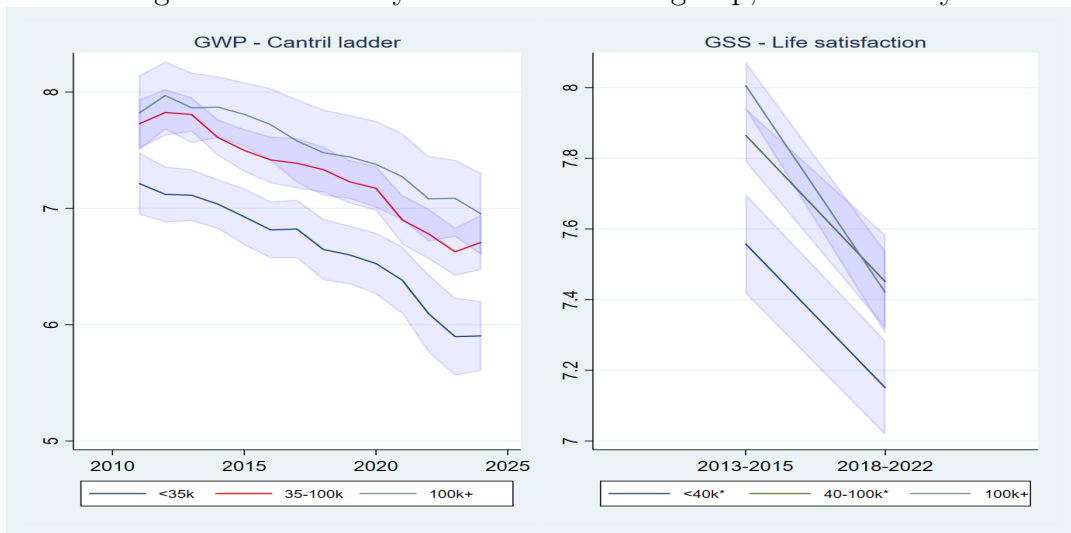
income. There are differences in the definition of income brackets across surveys. The upper cut-off for low income is variously set at 35k, 36k, and 40k per year depending on surveys, due to different surveys using different income brackets of their own. The threshold that defines high income is 100k/year in the GWP and in the GSS for Canada. For the U.S. it is \$100k in GWP, \$90k in the GHWI, and \$75k in BRFSS. Admittedly \$75,000 does not obviously define “high income” in the U.S., but that is how the BRFSS defined its top-income category until 2020. We further note that the GWP suffers from small-sample problems. So we use three-year averages as we did earlier for the cohort/gender splits.

Specific to the comparison by income class, we note that from 2013 on the GSS switched from using self-reported income to using administrative tax information linked to survey participants. For valid comparison, we include only surveys that use administrative information in both the most recent round and in the earlier round. As a result, only 3 themes of GSS are included, namely the Giving, Volunteering and Participating survey, the Time Use survey, and the Victimization survey. We then pool together the three surveys between 2013 and 2015 and compare them against the same three themes between 2018 and 2022.

Figure 9 is for Canada. The main observation is that the decline of survey well-being is across the board, affecting the low income, the middle income and the higher income groups. In both GWP and GSS, the average life satisfaction of Canadian middle-income group (35/45k-100k) is closer to the high income group (100k+) than to the lower income group, and retained statistically significant advantage over the lower income group throughout the period.

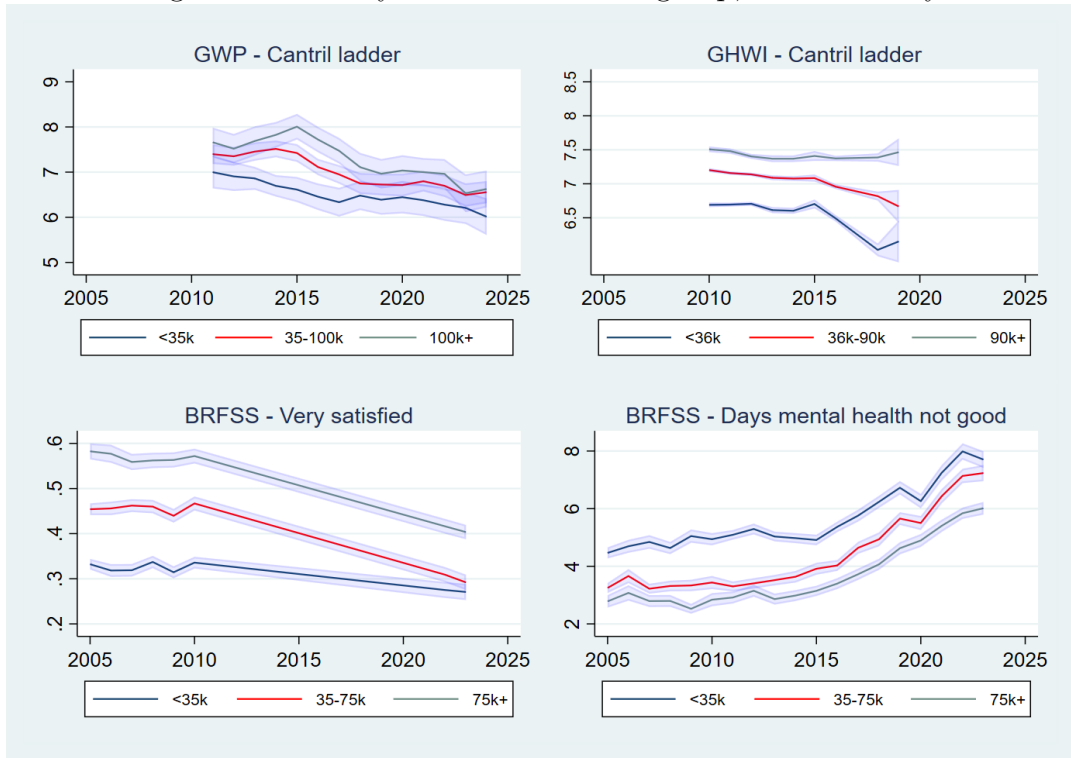
Figure 10, for the U.S., shows a similar picture of well-being declining across all income groups. Just like in Canada, no income group is spared in the gloomy picture. Looking at individual surveys, we observe that the GWP, probably due to its sample size, show substantial overlap of confidence intervals between income classes especially in recent years. The BRFSS, which has a much larger sample size, shows more clear difference by income in subjective well-being. Notably, the middle income group in the BRFSS (with household income between \$35k and \$75k) started with an substantial advantage over the low income group, but that advantage disappears over time. By 2022-2023, the middle-income group and the low-income group become largely indistinguishable in the share of population who said they are very satisfied with life, and in the average number of bad mental health days.

Figure 9: Canada by household-income group, below-35 only



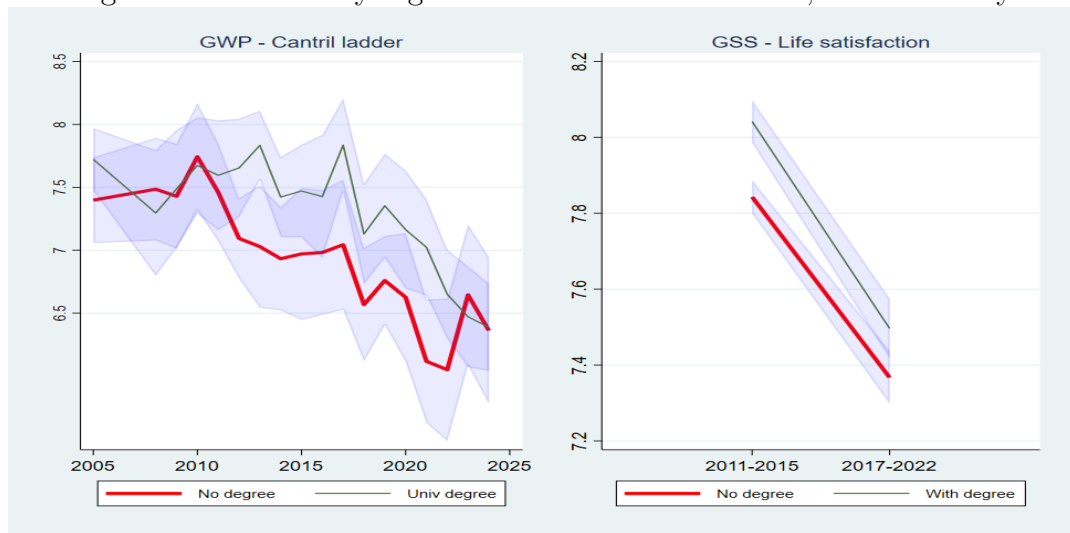
Notes: 1) “GWP - Cantril ladder” shows average Cantril ladder, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10, from GWP. “GSS - Life satisfaction” shows average life satisfaction, also on a scale from 0 to 10, from the GSS. 2) The GSS data come from pooled samples consisting of the Giving, Volunteering and Participating survey, the Time Us survey, and the Victimization survey, one of each theme, in both the earlier and the most recent period. We re-scaled survey weights so that each theme has an equal weight in a pooled sample.

Figure 10: U.S. by household-income group, below-35 only



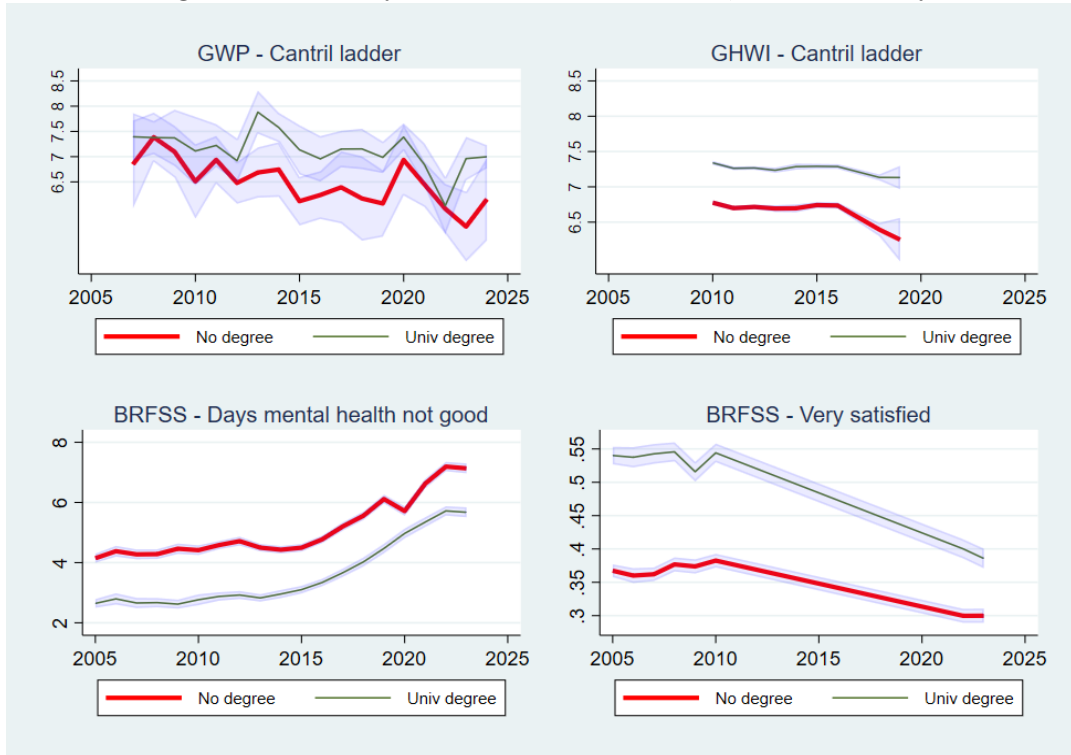
Notes: 1) “GWP - Cantril ladder” and “GHWI - Cantril ladder” shows average Cantril ladder, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10, from GWP and GHWI. “BRFSS - Very satisfied” shows the share of population who stated that they are “very satisfied” in life in BRFSS. “BRFSS - Days mental health not good” shows the average number of days when “mental health” was “not good” in the past 30 days. 2). The times series of “BRFSS - Very satisfied” have missing years between 2011 and 2021, thus the straight line. 3). The sample size of GHWI became smaller in 2018 and more so in 2019, its last year, thus greater standard errors and the widening of confidence intervals in 2018 and 2019.

Figure 11: Canada by highest educational attainment, below-35 only



Notes: 1) “GWP - Cantril ladder” shows average Cantril ladder, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10, from GWP. “GSS - Life satisfaction” shows average life satisfaction, also on a scale from 0 to 10, from the GSS. 2) The GSS data come from pooled samples consisting of all the six themes of the GSS in both the earlier and the most recent period. We re-scaled survey weights so that each theme has an equal weight in a pooled sample. 3).In the GSS we exclude current students from the comparison.

Figure 12: U.S. by educational attainment, below-35 only



Notes: 1) “GWP - Cantril ladder” and “GHWI - Cantril ladder” shows average Cantril ladder, which has a 11-point scale from 0 to 10, from GWP and GHWI. “BRFSS - Very satisfied” shows the share of population who stated that they are “very satisfied” in life in BRFSS. “BRFSS - Days mental health not good” shows the average number of days when “mental health” was “not good” in the past 30 days. 2). The times series of “BRFSS - Very satisfied” have missing years between 2011 and 2021, thus the straight line. 3). The sample size of GHWI became smaller in 2018 and more so in 2019, its last year, thus greater standard errors and the widening of confidence intervals in 2018 and 2019. 4). In the BRFSS we exclude current students from the comparison.

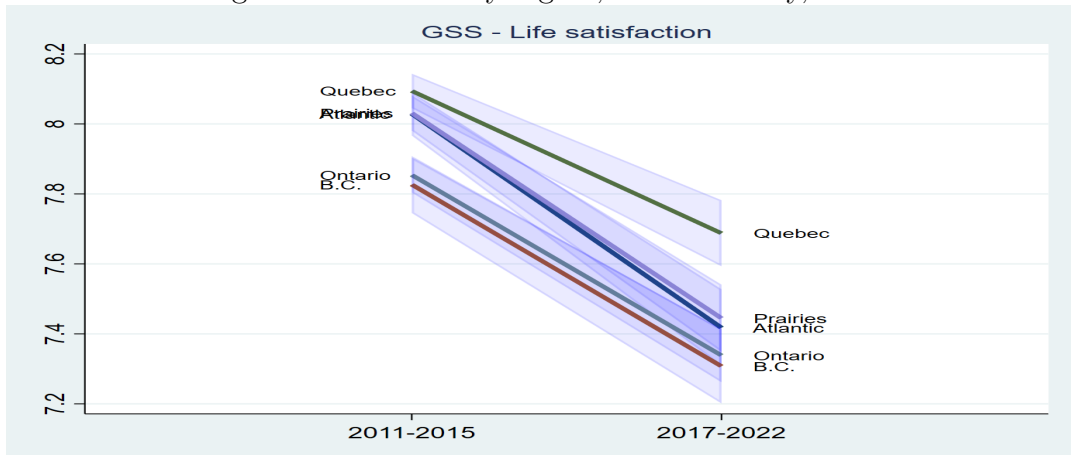
Next we move on to look at differences by educational attainment, specifically whether respondents have a university degree or not. Both BRFSS and GSS allow us to exclude current students from the comparison. In GWP and GHWI students are not excluded. Figure 11 is for Canada. It shows that both in GWP and GSS those with and without a university degree experience a similar decline in their average life satisfaction. Figure 12 shows a similar picture for the U.S. In GWP those without degree appear to have experienced a somewhat greater decline, but the sample is small and confidence intervals are large, making it hard to draw strong statistical conclusions. In the much larger BRFSS, the opposite appears to be the case, with degree holders experiencing a greater decline in the proportion who are “very satisfied” with life. For the average number of bad-mental health days, the two groups experienced a similar increase in the BRFSS. But overall, the picture in the U.S. is remarkably similar to that in Canada: the decline in well-being did not spare those who are university educated. Perhaps their decline in life satisfaction is not as severe as the “despair of death” (Case and Deaton, 2015) plaguing those without degrees, but it is still something worth of paying attention to.

3.4 Canada vs U.S., by geographic regions

This last subsection proceeds to a geographical breakdown, motivated by the literature on geography of discontents in the U.S. and elsewhere (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; Austin et al., 2018). Our purpose is to examine whether there is a geographic concentration of declines in subjective well-being in the two countries. We use broad geographical divisions: the five regions in Canada, two of which cover more than one province, and nine census divisions in the US, each including multiple states. For statistical power we focus on larger surveys, GSS for Canada, and BRFSS for the U.S.

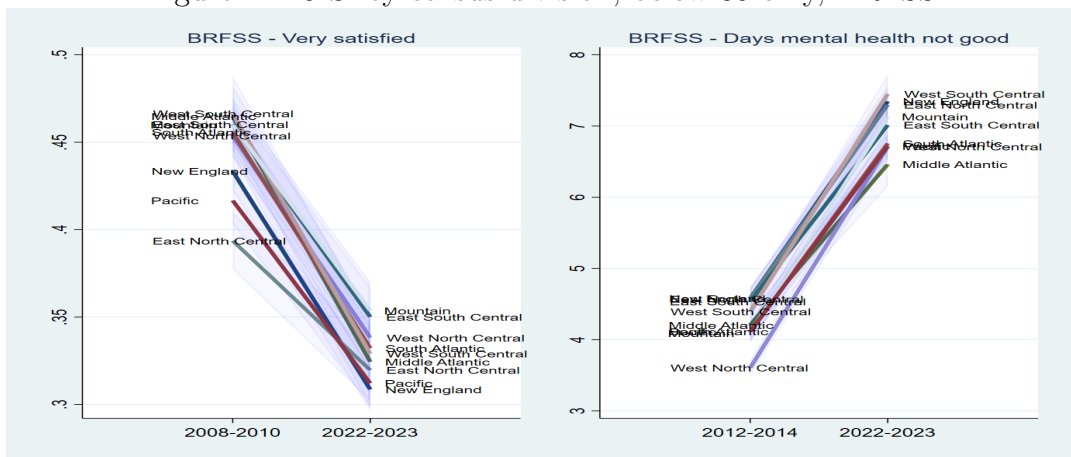
Figure 13 shows the Canadian data. We pooled the six themes of GSS between 2011 and 2015 and compare it against the pooled sample from 2017 to 2022. Each of the pooled samples has one of the six survey themes. We re-scale the survey weights so that each theme has an equal weight within a pool. The figure shows that younger Canadians’ decline in subjective well-being happened across all regions, with only modest differences. The Atlantic and Prairie regions used to report higher levels of life satisfaction. That advantage is now gone. Quebec started with the highest level of average satisfaction, and reports the least, though still substantial, decline over time. It now stands well above the rest of the country in terms of average life satisfaction of the young.

Figure 13: Canada by region, below-35 only, GSS



Notes: 1) “GSS - Life satisfaction” shows average life satisfaction, on a scale from 0 to 10, from the GSS. 2) The GSS data come from pooled samples consisting of all the six themes of the GSS in both the earlier and the most recent period. We re-scaled survey weights so that each theme has an equal weight in a pooled sample.

Figure 14: U.S. by census division, below-35 only, BRFSS



Notes: “BRFSS - Very satisfied” shows the share of population who stated that they are “very satisfied” in life in BRFSS. “BRFSS - Days mental health not good” shows the average number of days when “mental health” was “not good” in the past 30 days.

Figure 14 is for the U.S. It too shows that the decline in well-being has affected all regions in the U.S., sparing not even a single census division. Similar to what is observed in Canada, places with higher level of life satisfaction, here measured by the share of "very satisfied" responses, tend to experience greater declines (see for example the Mountain division and the West North Central division), while regions with lower initial level of satisfaction falls by less (e.g., East North Central). As a result, there is a narrowing of geographic gap in the satisfaction measure.

4 Summary of findings and discussions

In this paper we conducted a detailed comparison between Canada and U.S. in their younger generations' well-being experiences over the past two decades, focusing on those age below 35. For robustness we use multiple surveys including large ones conducted by domestic statistical and health agencies, thereby permitting finer segmentation of the population, as well as smaller surveys that are designed to keep track of population-wide well-being. Our most important finding is that the two countries share many commonalities and very few differences. They both have seen large declines in their young people's well-being. The timing is similar. We find more similarities when we examine young people by demographic, social-economic and geographic breakdowns. Here we list the main findings in some detail, before concluding with a brief discussion of future research.

The first common feature is that, in both countries, the decline in young people's well-being is very substantial. In the Gallup World Poll (GWP), both Canada and U.S. see the proportion of people who reported very low levels of Cantril life evaluation (0-4 along the 11-point scale from 0 to 10) increased from 5% to 14% in Canada over the last ten years. In the US, the share rose from 10% to 17%. The proportion of people who report high level of well-being (9 and 10) decreases from over 20% to around 10% in both countries. The large decline is replicated in larger surveys. Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) has a measure of life satisfaction on an identical scale. There the proportion of 0-4 evaluations more than doubles (albeit from a low base) from the 2011-2015 period to the 2017-2022 period, while the share of 9-10 responses fell by 26%. In the U.S. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), the average number of self-assessed bad-mental health days in a month increased from 4 to 7 over the past decade, while the share of young people who are "very satisfied"

in life decreases from 43% to 32%.

Second, the two countries exhibit a remarkably consistent picture in terms of when the decline happened. In both countries the decline happened before the COVID pandemic and picked up speed around the mid-2010s, an observation that is true in GWP, in the Canadian GSS, in the US BRFSS, and in Gallup Organization’s large daily-tracking poll, the Gallup-Heathways Well-being Index (GHWI).

Third, the declines are the most dramatic for Gen Z. But Gen Y follows not far behind. This is true in both countries across surveys and across measures of well-being (or ill-being).

Fourth, there is no noticeable gender difference in the declines. There are some level differences such as young females reporting higher level of mental stress than males. But there is little difference in changes. This is especially true for Gen Y, for which we have good data coverage over time. Male Gen Y and female Gen Y report similar declines in well-being, and similar increases in ill-being across surveys and measures. For Gen Z, our time series is more limited because they were too young to be covered in earlier survey years. But based on what is available to us, we do not detect any noticeable difference in the well-being movements of female Gen Z vs male Gen Z.

Fifth, in both Canada and U.S., the declines in subjective well-being happen across economic status in both countries, affecting those with low household incomes, those with high incomes, and those in the middle. Notably, in the U.S. survey respondents with household income between \$35,000 a year \$75,000 a year experienced a greater decline than the lower-income group, and has largely lost their initial advantage in life satisfaction and mental health. In Canada, the middle-income group (\$40,000-100,000 a year in household income) still has some well-being advantage over the lower-income group in recent years.

Finally, we find substantial declines in all the 5 Canadian regions and all 9 U.S. census divisions. The declines spare not a single region, not a single census division. Furthermore, in both countries, there is evidence of a narrowing of regional gaps in life satisfaction, driven by the somewhat greater declines in regions that started with a higher initial level of life satisfaction, such as the Atlantic and the Prairie regions in Canada, and the Mountain and West North Central divisions in the U.S.

The high degree of similarity between Canada and the U.S. is remarkable because the two countries have modest differences in real GDP growth rate and very large difference in equity-market performance over the past decade, as

well as differences in political events and seemingly different outcomes in recent elections. The observation calls for more in-depth studies on the causes of the decline, including the transmission mechanism of economic growth and wealth creation to young people, as well as the impact of socio-political forces including the nature and use of social media in both countries. Subjective well-being has many causes. Even if the decline looks similar, the underlying sources can be different.

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