

Research in Brief



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Life Satisfaction and Perceived Social Cohesion Before and After Covid-19

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Introduction

A close look at changes in life satisfaction and perceived social cohesion from 2016 onward reveals the following trends. First, life satisfaction fell and self-reported depression levels rose markedly among men in their 40s and 50s and women in their 20s and 30s, and such groups with significant income loss as the self-employed, and those who self-identified as lower-middle class. Second, the public's sense of national pride, social trust, and perceived social cohesion have increased to a large extent from their pre-pandemic levels. Third, interpersonal trust and social capital at the individual level in contrast has declined from their pre-pandemic levels. The sense of national pride in having, with a systematic quarantine management and the mature civic awareness of Koreans, responded aptly to the covid-19 crisis is thought to have translated into the rise in perceived social cohesion, while it is presumably as a consequence of the disproportionate effects of the pandemic that life satisfaction fell and the level of self-reported depression rose. There is a need to commit wide-ranging policy interventions on the one hand to preventing the effect of covid-19 pandemic from becoming long-term and on the other to promoting social cohesion in response to the growing uncertainties of the present times.



Quality of life and perceived social cohesion in the time of covid-19

The ongoing covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated in a dramatic fashion how rife the world today is with uncertainty, anxiety, fear, confusion, disintegration and conflict. The pandemic, now in its third year, has brought on profound changes on almost all social fronts including the movement of populations and commodities, the global economy, politics, culture, education, household income, labor market, and consumption patterns, heavily affecting people’s quality of life, life satisfaction and mental health. It can be assumed that there have been changes also in the public’s trust in the government and in perceived social cohesion as, in the course of responding to the pandemic, interactions grew between the government and civic society. This study examines the patterns of changes after covid-19 in life satisfaction and perceived social cohesion and draws therefrom implications for policy¹⁾, using data obtained from a set of common questions included in social cohesion surveys for the years 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2021²⁾.



Life satisfaction and self-reported depression before and after covid-19

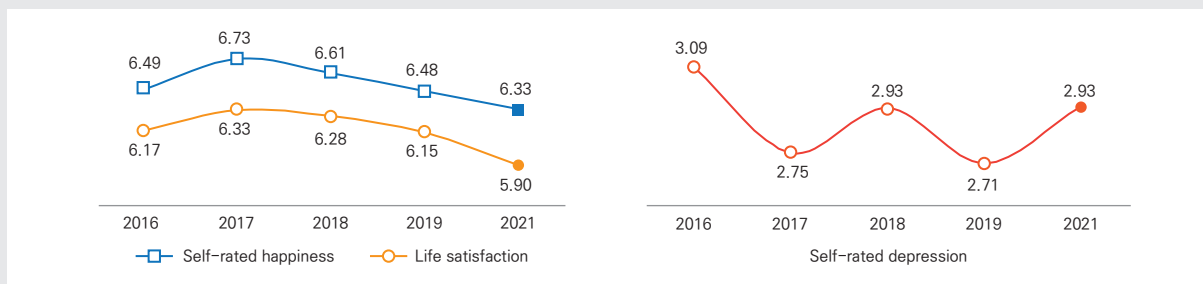
Subjective happiness and life satisfaction, having risen steeply in 2017, dropped after the covid-19 pandemic broke out, while the level of self-reported depression went up. Subjective happiness and life satisfaction in 2021 scored 6.33 points and 5.90 points, down by 0.14 points and 0.26 points, respectively, from 2019 (Figure 1). The self-reported depression score has fluctuated considerably since 2016, rising to 2.93 points in 2021 from 2.71 points in 2019

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1) A couple of limitations of this study need to be noted from the outset. For one thing, the findings of this study do not assess causation but temporal variations. This is to say that within the framework of this study, it is hard to ascertain whether the changes observed in 2021 are a direct consequence of covid-19. For another, this study, conducted before the fourth wave of covid-19 hit the country, does not mirror the effect of public fatigue over increased social distancing rules, a growing loss of earnings among self-employed workers, and the dispute over the introduction of vaccine passes.

2) The “social cohesion survey”, conducted face-to-face between June and September in the years mentioned, include a total of 4,000 men and women aged 19 to 75. The survey started in 2014 and has since been carried out on a different theme each year. This study uses data gained from a large number of questions concerning life satisfaction and perceived social cohesion that are common to all the versions of the survey. The years 2014 and 2015 are not taken into account, as the survey is considered to have acquired enough stability only since 2016. The 2020 version is also excluded, because the year was the only time when the survey was conducted online, instead of in the usual face-to-face format, due to the covid-19 situations then, and also on account of the limited age range of participants that year.

[Figure 1] Subjective happiness and life satisfaction (left) and self-reported depression (right) before and after covid-19



Note: Happiness is measured on an 11-point scale, where 0 is for “not at all happy” and 10 for “very happy”. Life satisfaction scores range from 0 (“not at all satisfied”) to 10 (“very satisfied”). Self-rated depression scores run between “not at all depressed” (0) and “very depressed” (10).

Source: A Study of Social Cohesion: Koreans’ Perceived Social Cohesion (2016). KIHASA; A Study of Social Problem and Social Cohesion in Korea with Policy Recommendations (2017). KIHASA; A Study of Social Conflict and Social Cohesion (2018). KIHASA; A Study of Assessment of Social Cohesion Status (2019). KIHASA; A Study of Socioeconomic Crisis and Social Cohesion (2021). KIHASA.

[Table 1] Happiness, life satisfaction and subjective depression scores for 2019 and 2021

		Happiness			Life satisfaction			Subjective depression		
		2019	2021	*	2019	2021	*	2019	2021	*
All		6.48	6.33	-	6.15	5.90	***	2.71	2.93	**
Age	20~39	6.84	6.55	*	6.34	6.06	*	2.44	2.67	-
	40~59	6.41	6.28	-	6.13	5.88	*	2.71	3.10	***
	60~79	5.94	6.10	-	5.85	5.67	-	3.19	3.04	-
Employment status	Regular employment	6.61	6.61	-	6.29	6.15	-	2.45	2.64	-
	Non-regular employment	6.00	5.97	-	5.68	5.50	-	3.07	3.26	-
	Self-employed	6.49	6.07	***	6.25	5.66	***	2.58	3.07	***
	Unemployed	5.69	5.73	-	5.24	5.28	-	3.29	3.33	-
	Economically inactive	6.57	6.46	-	6.16	6.04	-	2.95	3.00	-
Income quintiles	Quintile 1	5.83	5.72	-	5.48	5.34	-	3.36	3.50	-
	Quintile 2	6.37	6.12	-	5.98	5.73	-	2.80	3.25	*
	Quintile 3	6.62	6.51	-	6.23	6.00	-	2.61	2.84	-
	Quintile 4	6.71	6.54	-	6.46	6.16	-	2.38	2.59	-
	Quintile 5	6.93	6.83	-	6.68	6.28	*	2.31	2.45	-
Self-identified class	Low	5.24	5.30	-	4.93	4.83	-	3.90	3.78	-
	Lower middle	6.26	6.16	-	5.99	5.69	***	2.68	2.95	-
	Middle	6.87	6.68	-	6.48	6.29	-	2.51	2.73	-
	Higher middle (high)	7.43	7.34	-	7.26	6.87	-	1.84	2.32	-

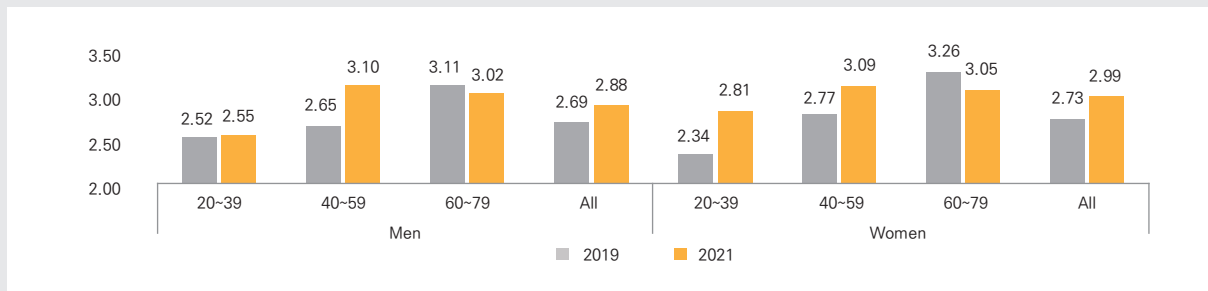
Note: 1) Happiness is measured on an 11-point scale, where 0 is for “not at all happy” and 10 for “very happy”. Life satisfaction scores range from 0 (“not at all satisfied”) to 10 (“very satisfied”). Self-rated depression scores run between “not at all depressed” (0) and “very depressed” (10).

2) A single asterisk denotes significance at the 5% level, a double asterisk at the 1% level, and a triple asterisk at the 0.1% level.

Source: A Study of Assessment of Social Cohesion Status (2019). KIHASA; A Study of Socioeconomic Crisis and Social Cohesion (2021). KIHASA.

Table 1 illustrates in an indirect way the effect covid-19 has had on subjective happiness, life satisfaction and self-rated depression levels. Whereas, between 2019 and 2021, people in their 20s and 30s saw a 0.29-point decline in their subjective happiness and life satisfaction, happiness in people in their 60s and 70s increased by 0.16 points over the same period. The level of self-rated depression increased by the largest margin for people aged 40 to 59, up 0.38 points from 2019.

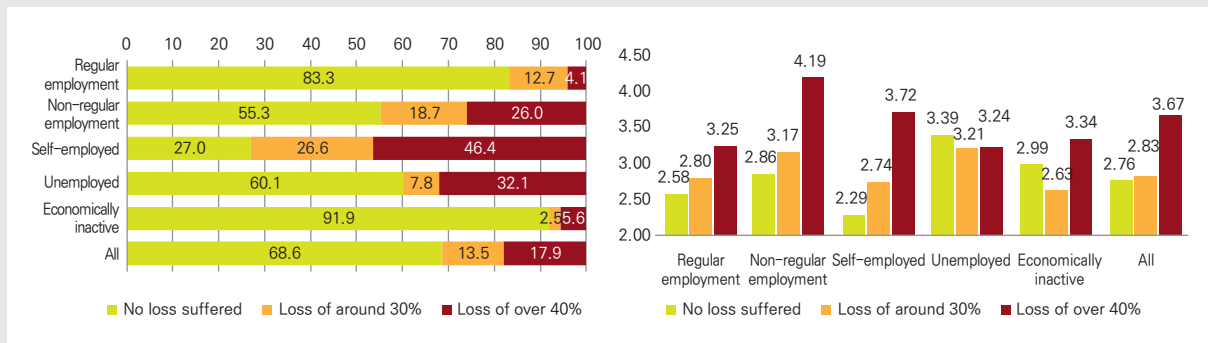
[Figure 2] Subjective depression levels in men and women of different age groups for 2019 and 2021



Source: A Study of Assessment of Social Cohesion Status (2019). KIHASA; A Study of Socioeconomic Crisis and Social Cohesion (2021). KIHASA.

Among men, the level of self-rated depression increased by the most in those in their 40s and 50s. In women, it was those in their 20s and 30s who saw the biggest increase in the level of self-rated depression (Figure 2). Subjective happiness and life satisfaction declined more in self-employed workers than in people in any other employment category. This presumably has closely to do with the loss suffered by self-employed workers in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic. The percentage of those whose earnings declined after covid-19 was much higher in the self-employed than in those in other employment categories. As many as 46.4 percent of self-employed people had an earnings loss of over 40 percent and 26.6 percent an earnings loss of anywhere between 10 and 20 percent. Those among temporary workers and daily contract workers who saw their earnings shrink by over 40 percent had a high self-rated depression level of 4.19 points, even higher than the 3.72 points reported by self-employed people whose earnings shrank by 40 percent or more (Figure 3).

[Figure 3] Self-reported earnings loss (left) and the level of self-reported depression (right) after covid-19, by employment status (in %, points)



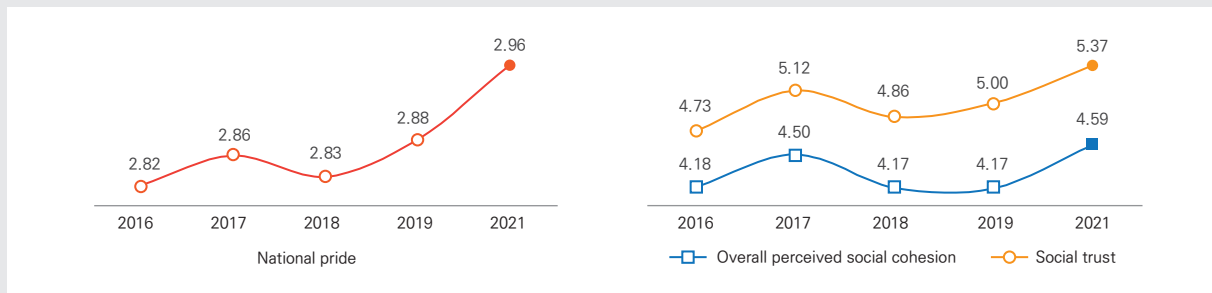
Source: A Study of Socioeconomic Crisis and Social Cohesion (2021). KIHASA.



Perceived social cohesion before and after covid-19

In contrast to the decline observed in subjective happiness and life satisfaction, perceived social cohesion is found to have risen after covid-19. The public’s level of national pride hovered between 2.88 and 2.9 points over the years between 2016 and 2019. In 2021, however, the level of national pride reached as high as 2.96 points (Figure 4). The level of perceived social cohesion and of social trust also have risen over these years. Perceived social cohesion scored 4.18 points in 2016 and 4.17 points both in 2018 and in 2019. However, the score was saliently higher for 2017 and 2021, at 4.50 points and 4.59 points, respectively. Since 2016, the overall level of perceived social cohesion changed in a pattern similar to changes in the social trust score, which peaked at 5.37 points in 2021.

[Figure 4] National pride (left) and overall perceived social cohesion and social trust (right), 2016~2021



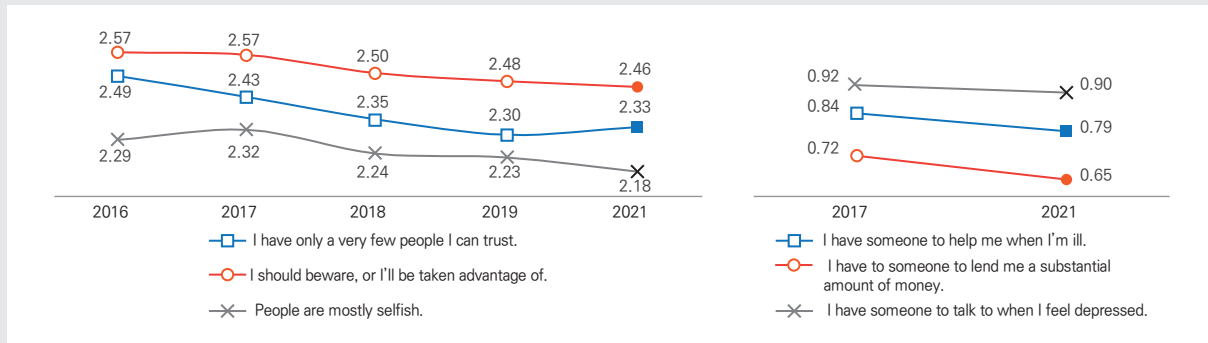
Note: 1) National pride was measured on a 4-point scale running from “very proud” (1) to “not proud at all” (4), with the outcome numbers reverse-coded; Overall perceived social cohesion was rated on a 11-point scale running from “no social cohesion at all” (0) to “very high social cohesion” (10); Overall social trust is also measured on a 11-point scale;

2) The differences in the three variables between 2019 and 2021 were considered of statistical significance at the 0.1 level.

Source: A Study of Social Cohesion: Koreans’ Perceived Social Cohesion (2016). KIHASA; A Study of Social Problem and Social Cohesion in Korea with Policy Recommendations (2017). KIHASA; A Study of Social Conflict and Social Cohesion (2018). KIHASA; A Study of Assessment of Social Cohesion Status (2019). KIHASA; A Study of Socioeconomic Crisis and Social Cohesion (2021). KIHASA.

Social trust rose markedly after covid-19, while interpersonal trust as perceived at the individual level declined, if not significantly, over this period. An increasing number of respondents agreed with the statements like “There are only a very small number of people I can trust”, “I should beware, or I’ll be taken advantage of”, and “People are mostly selfish” (Figure 5). This is to say that the overall rise in social trust did not translate into interpersonal trust at the individual level. The ‘crisis’ that is covid-19 in a way has enabled people to have the positive experience of standing, together with the government, up to the difficulties they were facing. This, however, is, as the findings suggest, quite different from the trust individuals come to have in each other as they interact one another in a direct way.

[Figure 5] Trends in interpersonal trust (left) and social capital (right)



Note: 1) Interpersonal trust is measured on a 5-point scale which ranges from “highly disagree” (1) to “highly disagree” (5) with the statements “There are only a very small number of people I can trust”, “I should beware, or I’ll be taken advantage of”, “People are mostly selfish”. The higher the point, the higher the interpersonal trust level.”

2) Individual social capital is measured in terms of the following statements, “I have someone to help me with housework like preparing meals and shopping for groceries, etc., when I’m ill”, “I have someone to lend me a substantial amount of money right off when I need it”, “I have someone to talk to when I feel depressed. If one has no one, one’s social capital gets 0; if one has someone, one gets 1.

3) The differences in the three variables of interpersonal trust between 2019 and 2021 were considered statistically not significant at the 0.1 level; the differences in the three variables of social capital between 2019 and 2021 were considered of statistical significance at the 0.1 level.

Source: A Study of Social Cohesion: Koreans’ Perceived Social Cohesion (2016). KIHASA; A Study of Social Problem and Social Cohesion in Korea with Policy Recommendations (2017). KIHASA; A Study of Social Conflict and Social Cohesion (2018). KIHASA; A Study of Assessment of Social Cohesion Status (2019). KIHASA; A Study of Socioeconomic Crisis and Social Cohesion (2021). KIHASA.

[Table 2] Changes in social capital, between 2017 and 2021

		Overall social support			I have someone to help when I am ill			I have someone to lend me money when I need it			I have someone to talk to when I feel depressed		
		2017	2021	*	2017	2021	*	2017	2021	*	2017	2021	*
All		5.94	5.67	***	83.64	78.54	***	71.51	64.76	*	91.54	89.50	-
Age	20~39	6.30	5.91	***	87.70	81.35	***	77.02	68.71	***	95.93	94.17	-
	40~59	5.83	5.63	**	82.67	78.78	-	72.23	66.54	-	91.28	89.53	-
	60~79	5.50	5.35	-	77.74	73.76	-	58.92	55.43	-	83.38	82.23	***
Employment status	Regular	6.26	5.89	***	87.82	80.59	***	79.46	67.29	***	96.41	91.80	-
	Temporary	5.37	5.29	-	77.71	73.66	-	59.80	59.93	-	86.57	86.21	-
	Self-employed	5.82	5.69	-	83.50	81.64	-	73.18	68.28	-	90.52	89.69	-
	Unemployed	5.30	4.95	-	71.88	77.11	-	55.64	56.80	-	83.16	83.28	-
	Economically inactive	5.98	5.65	***	82.90	75.28	***	68.30	61.77	*	90.02	88.80	-

Income quintiles	Q1	5.20	5.08	-	72.89	74.05	-	53.56	52.79	-	79.58	80.23	-
	Q2	5.91	5.53	***	82.84	76.73	*	69.15	65.95	-	91.60	90.30	-
	Q3	6.06	5.75	***	85.77	81.59	-	73.91	67.02	*	94.59	91.04	-
	Q4	6.20	5.89	***	88.15	78.79	***	79.41	66.53	***	96.36	93.80	-
	Q5	6.47	6.12	***	89.76	82.09	**	83.71	72.63	***	96.73	92.40	*
Self-identified class	Low	4.66	4.72	-	66.42	67.57	-	51.31	44.01	-	75.22	77.44	-
	Lower-middle	5.76	5.49	***	83.49	78.84	*	68.23	63.21	*	80.75	90.20	-
	Middle	6.39	6.00	***	88.43	81.11	***	78.65	71.83	***	96.59	92.60	***
	Higher-middle	6.86	6.62	-	90.52	83.36	-	87.14	70.70	***	98.28	89.91	**

Note: 1) Happiness is measured on an 11-point scale, where 0 is for “not at all happy” and 10 for “very happy”. Life satisfaction scores range from 0 (“not at all satisfied”) to 10 (“very satisfied”). Self-rated depression scores run between “not at all depressed” (0) and “very depressed” (10).

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Source: A Study of Assessment of Social Cohesion Status (2019). KIHASA; A Study of Socioeconomic Crisis and Social Cohesion (2021). KIHASA.

Social capital is also found to have declined overall over the years examined. The proportions of those who reported having “someone to help me when I am ill” (78.5 percent), “someone to lend me a substantial amount of money right off when I need it” (64.8 percent), “someone to talk to when I feel depressed” (89.5 percent) all declined in 2021 compared to 2017, as did the level of perceived social support (5.67 points). The decline in perceived social support was significant in people in their 20s and 30s, economically inactive groups, those whose income belongs to the second to fifth quintiles, and people who identified themselves as lower-middle or middle class. It is a worrying sign that people have less resources from which they can seek help in such crisis situations as those ongoing, in which social support and social capital are more treasured than in normal times.

Concluding remarks

The need is more felt in such calamitous times as now for interpersonal trust and cooperation, social capital and social cohesion. The bright side of this study’s findings is that even in these hard times, there have been marked gains in national pride, perceived social cohesion and social trust. The systematic quarantine management and the high-level compliance of people to quarantine measures have contributed much to raising social cohesion, as is suggested by the notion that the level of social integration varies depending on how competent the government is at responding to crisis situations.³⁾

3) Gisselquist, R. M., & Vaccaro, A. (2021). COVID 19 and the state. WIDER Working Paper 2021/80, United Nations University. <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2021/018-4>.

It is worth noting, however, that the levels of social cohesion and social trust may well lapse back into their previous state once “the rally around the flag” effect is gone or when a changeover comes on in the situation.⁴⁾

Also, if the crisis protracts, or if, even when it is gone, its effect in parts outlasts it, the consequence might well be detrimental to social integration. This concern is buttressed by the fact that after the pandemic broke out, even as national pride, perceived social cohesion and social trust increased, at the individual level, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, interpersonal trust and social capital all declined while self-reported depression increased. An aspect that calls for special attention is that life satisfaction declined and self-reported depression increased significantly for groups especially hard hit by the covid-19 pandemic, including self-employed workers, those self-identified as lower-middle class, men in their 40s and 50s, and women in their 20s and 30s.

There is a need to implement well-organized policy interventions to cushion the impact of the pandemic while increasing people’s life satisfaction and perceived social cohesion. Most important in this effort is to spare no means—financial, physical and socio-psychological—to help those affected restore as much as possible their pre-pandemic living standards. Along with this, ways should be sought in earnest to promote social trust and social capital in the mid-to-long term. Korea is a country where, even before the covid-19 pandemic, interpersonal trust, civic engagement, volunteering, and tolerance of minority groups remained low relative to other OECD countries. It is necessary to weave an alternative sociocultural fabric through which “weak ties” thread their way to bring together individuals who have been left as isolated from each other as are grains of sand scattered around. Civic education and school education should be made use of as a means to help people, young and old alike, strengthen trust and cooperation among them and navigate together the world of uncertainties.

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4) Nielsen, J. H., & Lindvall, J. (2021) Trust in government in Sweden and Denmark during the COVID-19 epidemic, *West European Politics*, 44:5-6, 1180-1204.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1909964>