

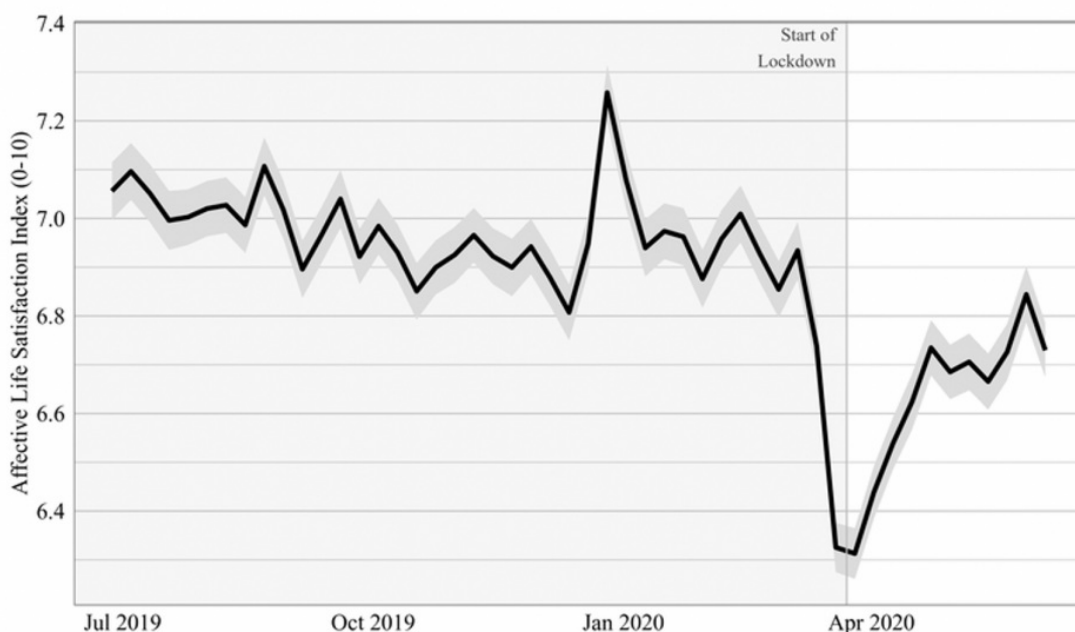
Well-being increased during the first UK lockdown – but not for everyone

[Sam Gilbert](#), [Mark Fabian](#), and [Roberto Foa](#) draw on data from the first UK lockdown to illustrate how well-being levels improved, contrary to what may have been expected. They nevertheless explain that such improvements were not evenly distributed among the population and discuss the policy implications of their findings.

In the second quarter of 2020, the period of the UK's first COVID-19 lockdown, suicides were down 36% year-on-year. In fact, according to [provisional data](#) released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the suicide rate was the lowest for any quarter since the ONS started publishing data on suicides in 2001. What can explain this sharp fall? The ONS cautions that it probably reflects disruption to the coroner's service during the pandemic, rather than a genuine reduction in suicides. But our [research](#) raises a surprising alternative possibility: people are happier under lockdown.

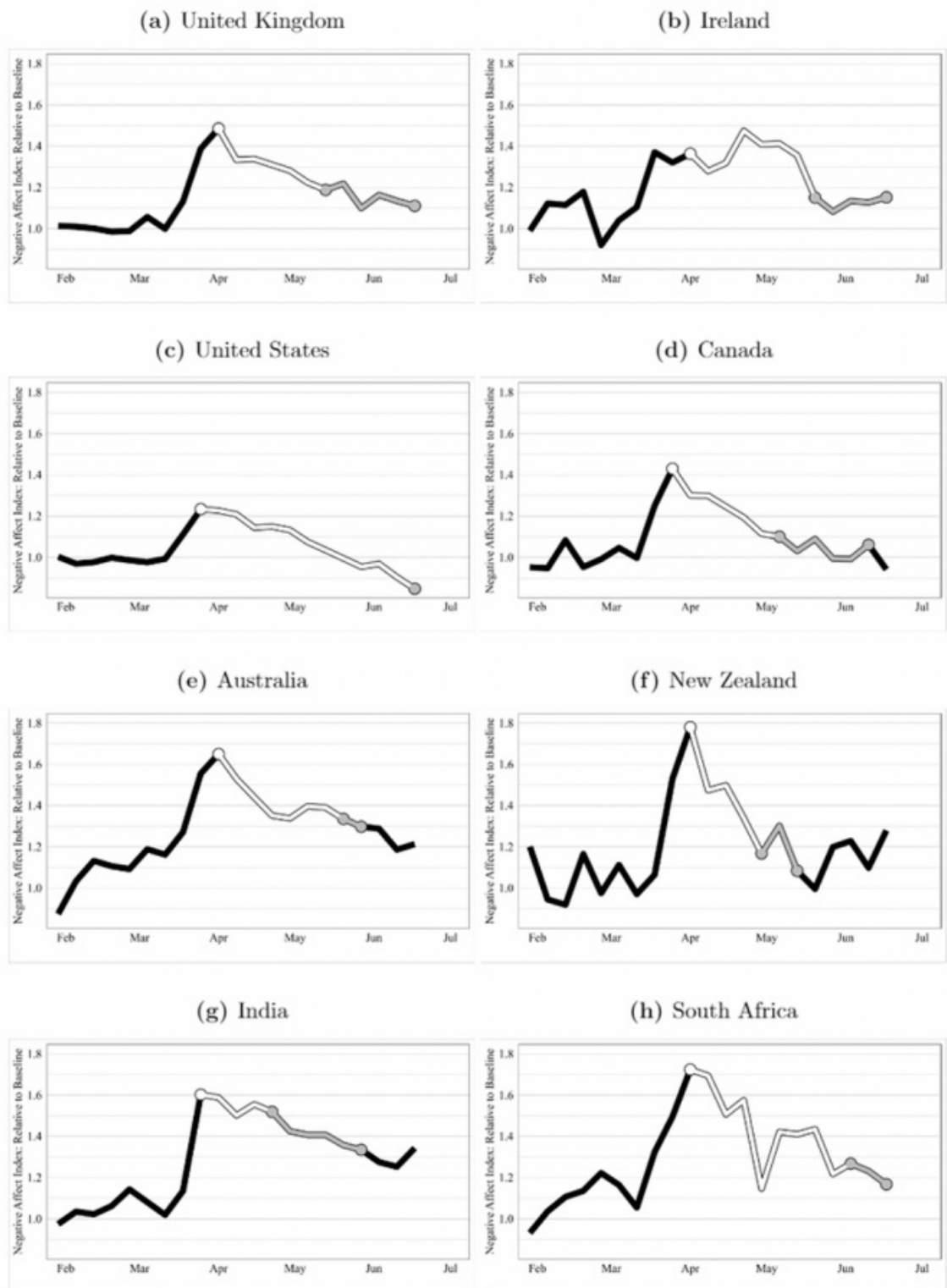
At first this claim seems counterintuitive – provocative, even. However, it's supported by analysis of two complementary datasets: [youGov's weekly mood tracker](#) and Google Trends. Since June 2019, YouGov has surveyed a representative sample of 2,000 Brits each week, asking them to report on a range of mood states. This data shows that while the onset of the pandemic had a very negative effect on mood, the implementation of lockdown quickly restored people's subjective well-being to its pre-pandemic baseline. Sadness, fear, and stress all fell during lockdown; and although boredom, loneliness, frustration, and apathy increased, so did happiness, optimism, inspiration, and contentment.

Figure 1: Life satisfaction in Great Britain between June 2019 and June 2020



The remarkable recovery of people's subjective well-being under lockdown seems not to have been confined to the UK. Google searches for negative emotions turn out to be highly correlated with the YouGov mood tracker, meaning that so-called 'negative affect' in different countries can be compared using [Google Trends](#). In New Zealand, Australia, India, South Africa, Ireland, the USA and Canada, Google data suggests that negative affect spiked as the pandemic took hold, but began to fall as soon as lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders were implemented.

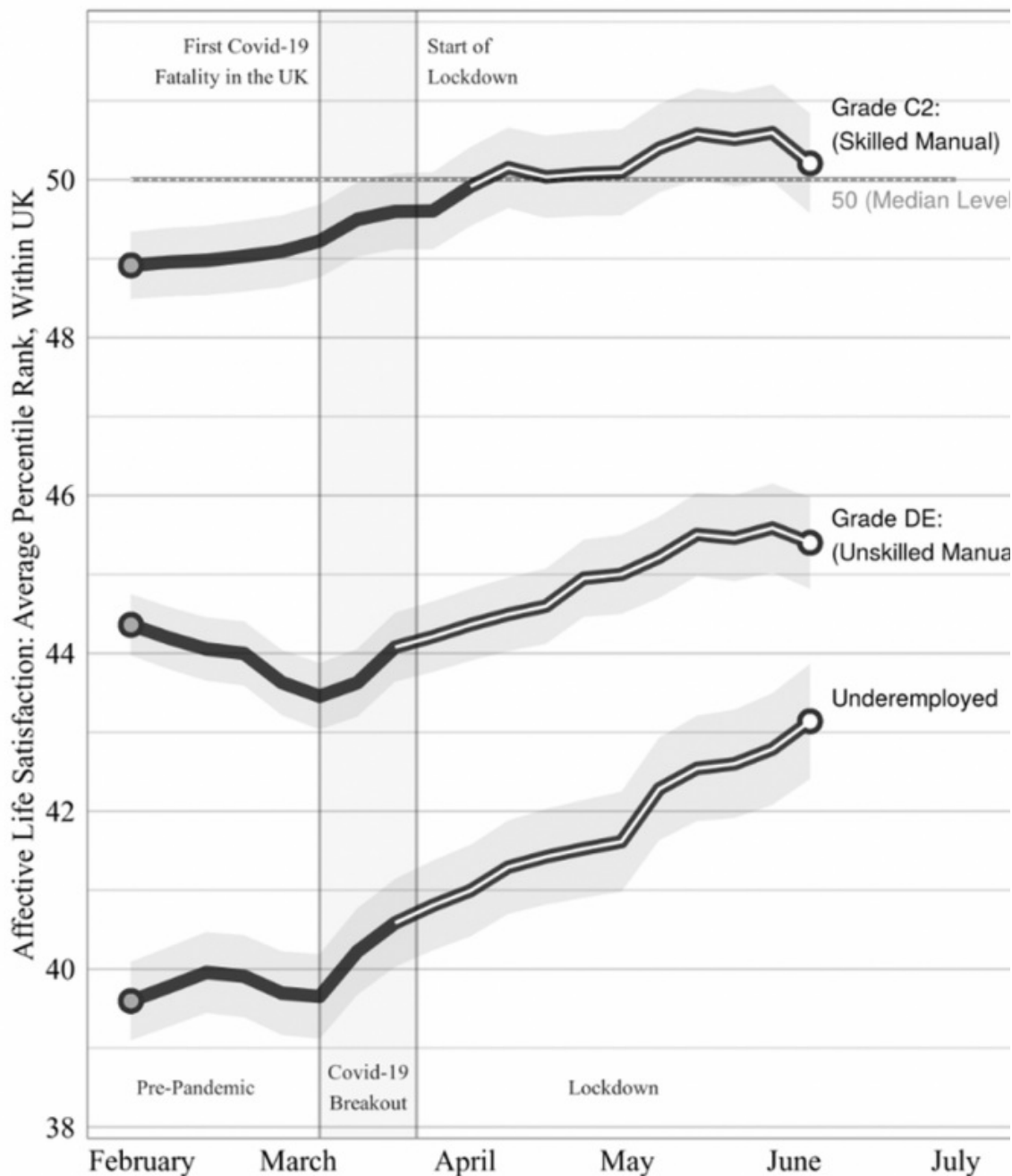
Figure 2: Changes in ‘negative affect’ by country, relative to a pre-pandemic baseline period (to February 15), according to their Google search data.



Note: Full lockdown indicated by white lines; partial lockdown indicated by grey lines.

Of course, saying that people were happier under lockdown does not imply that *everyone* was happier. In fact, improvements in well-being during the period of the first UK national lockdown were not evenly distributed. The YouGov data shows things were markedly worse for the elderly and women living alone, and somewhat worse for professionals. On the other hand, things were significantly better for low socioeconomic status men, whose overall life satisfaction increased more than any other group.

Figure 3: Changes in life satisfaction for three low socioeconomic status groups in G

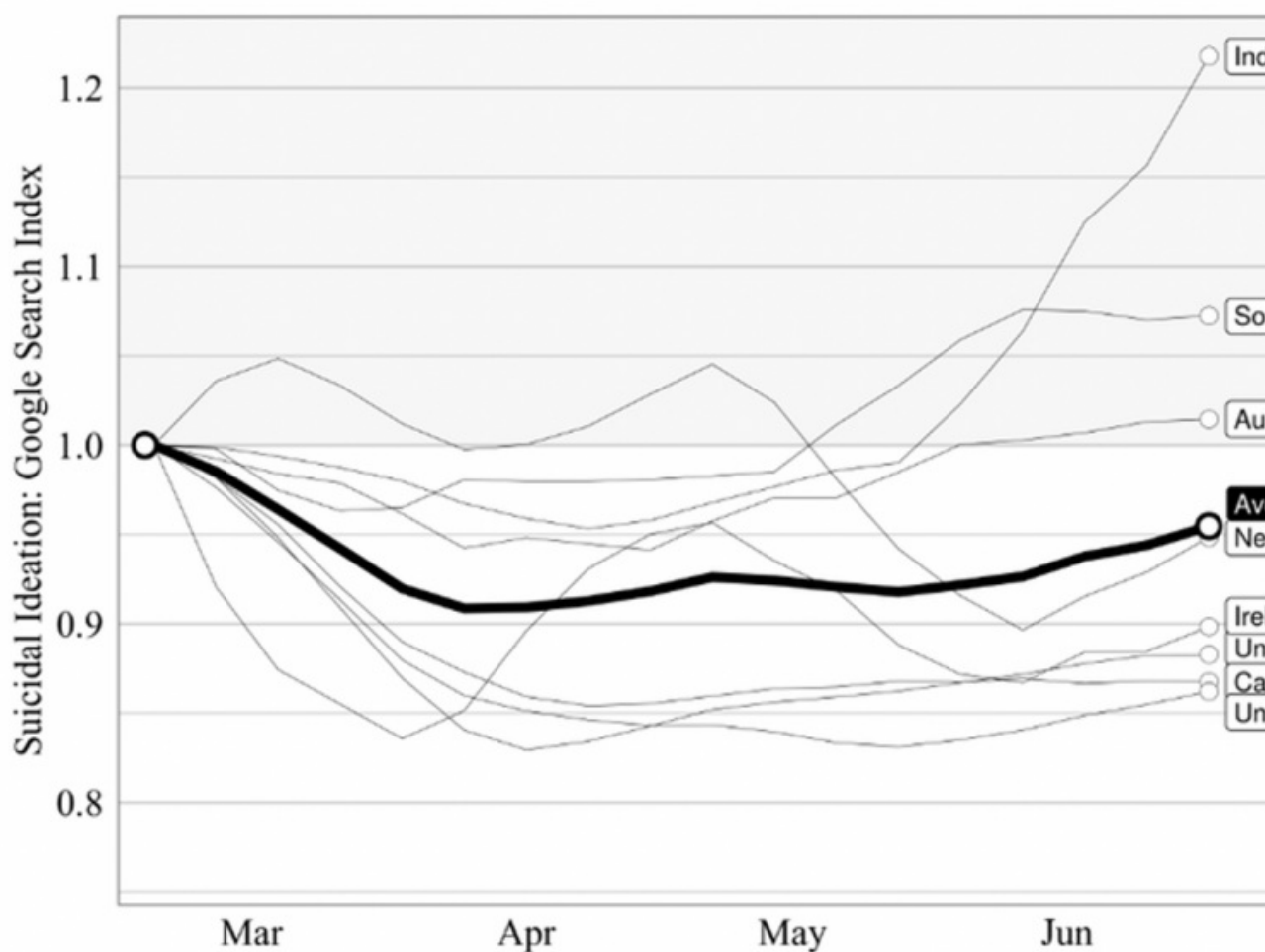


Note: White portions of lines indicate a statistically significant difference since 5 March, the first diagnosed COVID-19 fatality in Great Britain.

As men of low socioeconomic status are one of the highest risk groups for completed suicide attempts, the relative improvement in their mental health during lockdown may help explain the unexpected reduction in suicide rates during Q2.

We suspect that the exceptional welfare support measures put in place during the UK's first national lockdown alleviated many of the conditions which can prompt individuals to act on suicidal feelings – including eviction and homelessness, workplace bullying and stress, and problems keeping up with debt repayments. International comparisons seem to support this view. When we looked at suicide-related Google searches by country, India and South Africa were the outliers. Both countries implemented lockdowns with minimal social support mechanisms and saw a steep rise in suicide-related search rates. Elsewhere, suicide-related search during lockdown was flat or falling relative to its pre-pandemic baseline.

Figure 4: Search trends for suicidal ideation by country, compared to mid-February



The immediate policy implications in terms of the pandemic response are clear. Despite [widespread concerns](#), mental health costs are not a reason to avoid implementing local or national lockdowns – provided that income support measures such as furlough schemes remain in place. Meanwhile, policy interventions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of lockdown on well-being should prioritise the needs of women living alone and the elderly. With this in mind, [support bubbles](#) and revisions to the [guidance on shielding](#) are to be welcomed.

But there are also longer-term implications of the findings from this natural experiment. They hint both at the damage stressful working environments, housing insecurity, and indebtedness may be doing to well-being, and at the opportunity for policy innovations which strengthen the social safety net to deliver real improvements to people's happiness.

About the Authors

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