

8. Subjective well-being¹

It took nine years to recover from the collapse in subjective well-being that occurred in 2012. The percentage of population very satisfied with their lives reached 46% again in 2021. And it was precisely the two pandemic years that ensured this achievement. The increase in subjective well-being in the pandemic years is consistent with findings in other countries. People are satisfied with their lives not only by taking into account what happens to themselves, but by relating it to the context, and in this case to the drama of the events related to the spread of *COVID-19*. The growth in subjective well-being occurred despite the sharp decline, which had never been seen since the beginning of the historical series, in leisure time satisfaction, which lost 12.6 percentage points in 2021. The effects of the change in leisure time lifestyles became clear in the second year of the pandemic, i.e. when the pandemic was prolonged and the restrictions on social relationships and leisure activities outside the home were extended. The collapse in satisfaction with leisure time did not hinder the growth in the perception of prospects for improving one's life, which rose again in 2021 after a decline in the first year of the pandemic, indicating the emergence of a feeling of optimism towards the future, which is crucial for the country's growth.

The share of people very satisfied with their lives grew but declined among 14-19-year-olds

The percentage of people who report being very satisfied with their lives (score between 8 and 10) increased in the two pandemic years, from 43.2% in 2019 to 44.3% in 2020 and 46% in 2021 (Figure 1).

After 9 years, this increase recovered the positive peak of 2011, which was never reached again after the collapse in satisfaction due to the economic crisis of 2012. Among the youngest age group (14-19 years), the recovery had been more rapid and, already in 2019, the 2011 level had been reached. But the figures hide different dynamics. During the years of the pandemic, young people were the only ones to experience a significant deterioration in life satisfaction, with the percentage falling from 56.9% in 2019 to 52.3% in 2021. Of course, they still maintained the highest levels, but the percentage point advantage over people aged 75 and over almost halved, from 21.4 points in 2019 to 12.9 in 2021 (Figure 2). In 2020, we observed a fragile situation for people living alone, the only population group to register a decline in the percentage of very satisfied with life. In 2021, these recovered and reached the highest observed level (38.3%).

¹ This chapter was edited by Paola Conigliaro and Alessandra Tinto, with contributions from Lorena Di Donatantonio.

Figure 1. Subjective well-being indicators by gender. Years 2019-2021. Per 100 persons aged 14 and over with the same characteristics

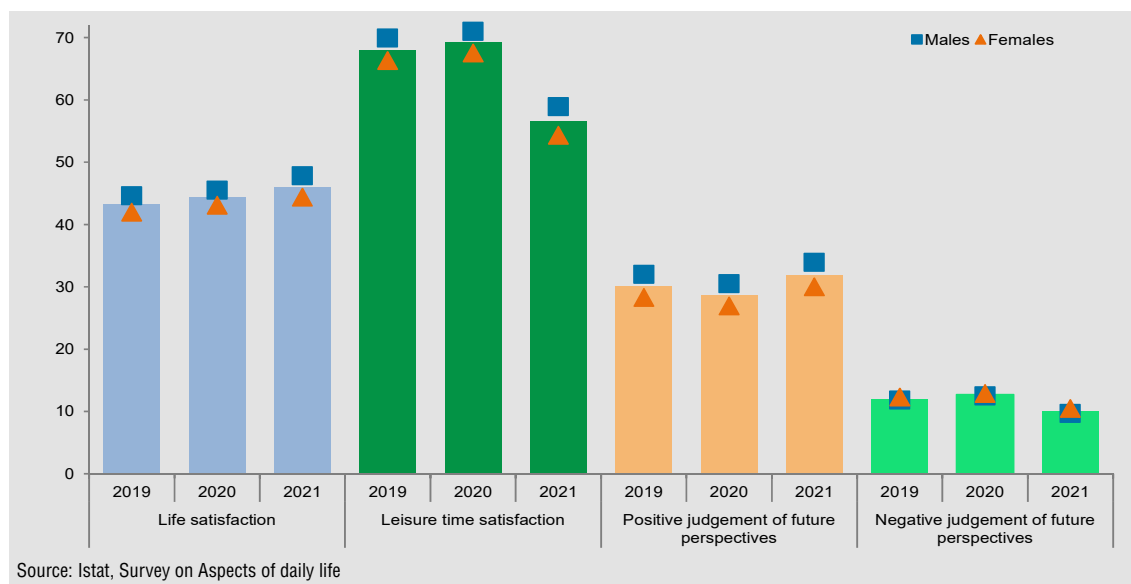
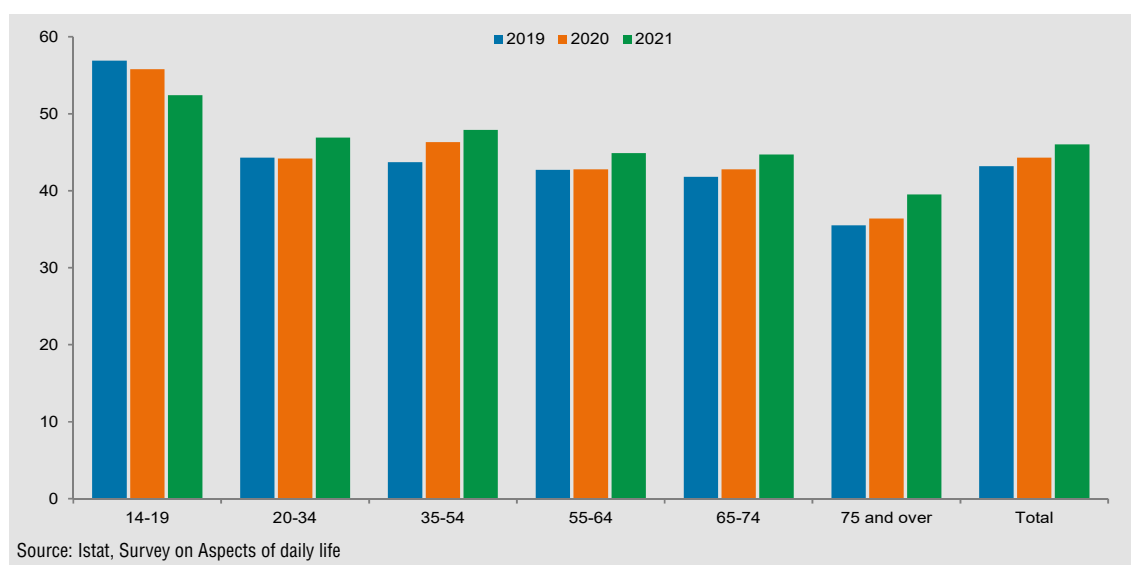


Figure 2. People aged 14 and over who gave a high score (8-10) to their life satisfaction, by age group. Years 2019-2021. Percentages



Leisure time satisfaction decreased, especially among the very young

On the other hand, leisure time satisfaction showed a clear collapse: the percentage of people who were very or fairly satisfied with their free time, after having risen by 1.2 percentage points to 69.2% in 2020, dropped by 12.6 points in 2021, settling at the lowest value ever recorded since 1993² (56.6%), with a more evident drop among women (-13.2 percentage points compared to 2020 - Figure 1). This figure appears to be a clear effect of the closures

² The first year in which information was surveyed with the Aspects of Daily Life Survey.

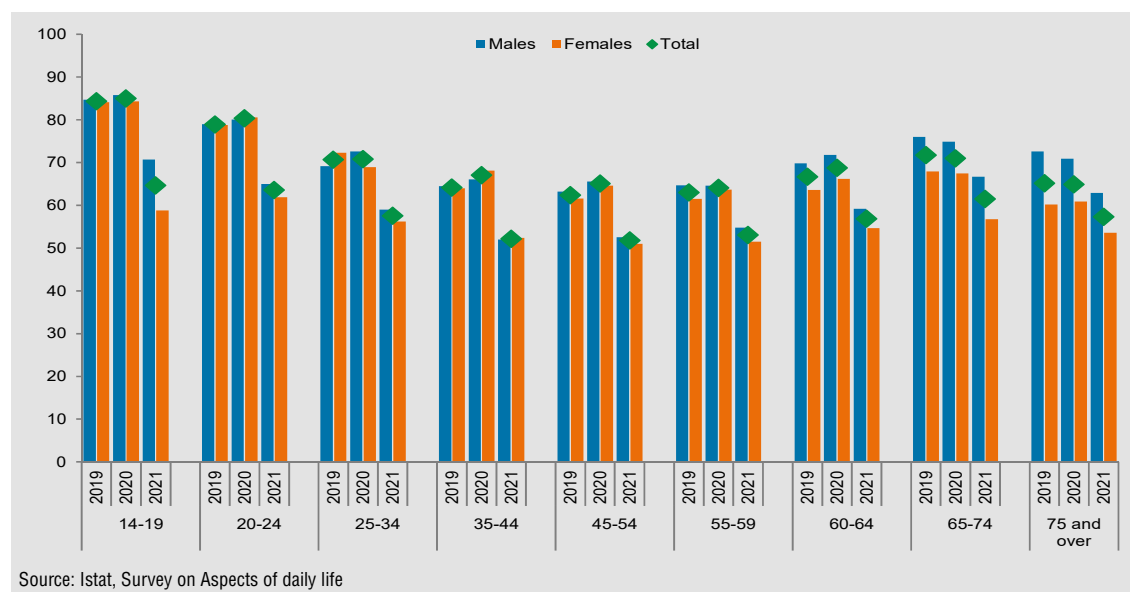
and limitations that affected leisure activities outside the home and social relationships³. The collapse cut across all ages, but the situation was particularly critical for the very young, among whom leisure time satisfaction dropped by more than 20 percentage points compared to 2020 (-26.1 among girls), with 64.5% of 14-19-year-olds saying they were satisfied in 2021. The share remained consistent, but by virtue of this substantial decrease, the difference with the most dissatisfied (age group 45-54) in 2021 decreased to 12.8 percentage points, compared to 22 points in 2019.

A lower percentage of satisfaction for leisure time were observed, as in the past among those between the ages of 35 and 59, with percentages of just over 50% and a decrease of about one-fifth compared to the 2020 value. The relative position of people aged 75 and over improved with a smaller, albeit significant decrease (-7.6 percentage points - Figure 3). Leisure time satisfaction was generally higher not only among those engaged in study but also for people who had retired from work and those seeking their first job, while it was lowest for those in employment.

In line with what was observed for the younger population, the reduction in the percentage of those satisfied with leisure in 2021 was particularly marked among students (-19.6 points). Female students in particular, with a decrease of 24.3 percentage points, had a percentage of satisfied (57.5%) that was very close to the female unemployed (58.3%) in 2021. The percentage of satisfied with leisure time also dropped most sharply among the employed in 2021 (-14.8 points).

Undoubtedly, the restrictions imposed by the measures against the spread of the pandemic considerably reduced socialising opportunities, especially for the very young, as well as the practice of non-competitive sporting activities, the possibility of going to concerts or simply eating or drinking out with friends.

Figure 3. People aged 14 and over who are very or quite satisfied with their leisure time, by age group and gender. Years 2019-2021. Percentages



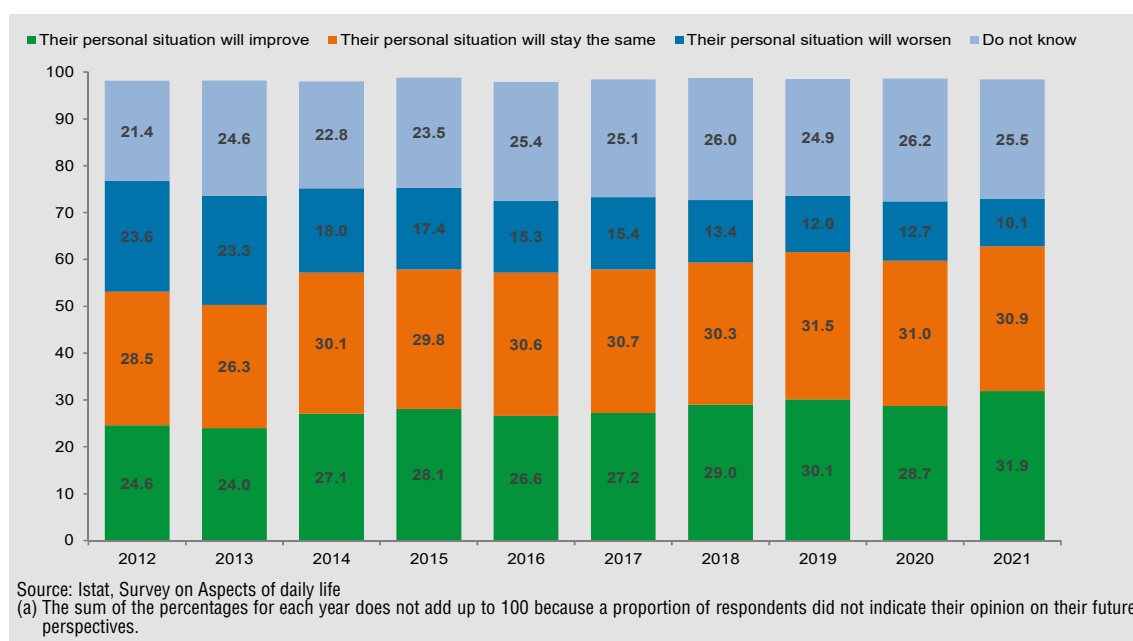
³ See chapters on Education and training and Social relationships.

2021 saw the highest proportion of optimists and the lowest proportion of pessimists

The percentage of people who believed that their personal situation would improve over the next five years rose to 31.9% in 2021, reaching the highest value observed so far. This growth followed the 1.4 percentage point drop that had brought the share below 30% (28.7%) in 2020, due to the many uncertainties that accompanied the first year of the pandemic. The attitude of growing optimism towards the future, probably also as a result of the start of vaccination campaign, was also confirmed by the decrease in the percentage of people who believed that their situation would worsen (down to 10.2% from 12.7% in 2020 - Figure 1).

If we broaden our view over a longer period, between 2012 and 2021, the assessment of future prospects shows an increase in the percentage of optimists in all age groups, although starting from very different values (Figure 4). The progressive reduction of those who state that their situation will worsen in the next five years is even more evident. The lowest value can be observed in 2021, when it was 13.4 percentage points lower than in 2012. The percentage of people who believe that the situation will remain the same is stable at around 30% over the past few years. Finally, a share of more than a quarter of the population, virtually unchanged since 2016, states that they do not know how to assess this.

Figure 4. People aged 14 and over by opinion on their future perspectives. Years 2012-2021. Percentages (a)



The assessment of future prospects is increasingly less positive as age increases. This was confirmed in 2021, with over 60% of 14-34-year-olds believing that their situation would improve in the next five years. This was followed by a clear gap of more than 18 percentage points between people aged 25-34 (60.4%) and those aged 35-44 (42.3%), down to 3.7% for people aged 75 and over.

The increase in the share of optimists in 2021 was largest among 25-34-year-olds, rising from 55% in 2019 to 60.4% (53.4% in 2020) and bringing them closer to the share of younger optimists.

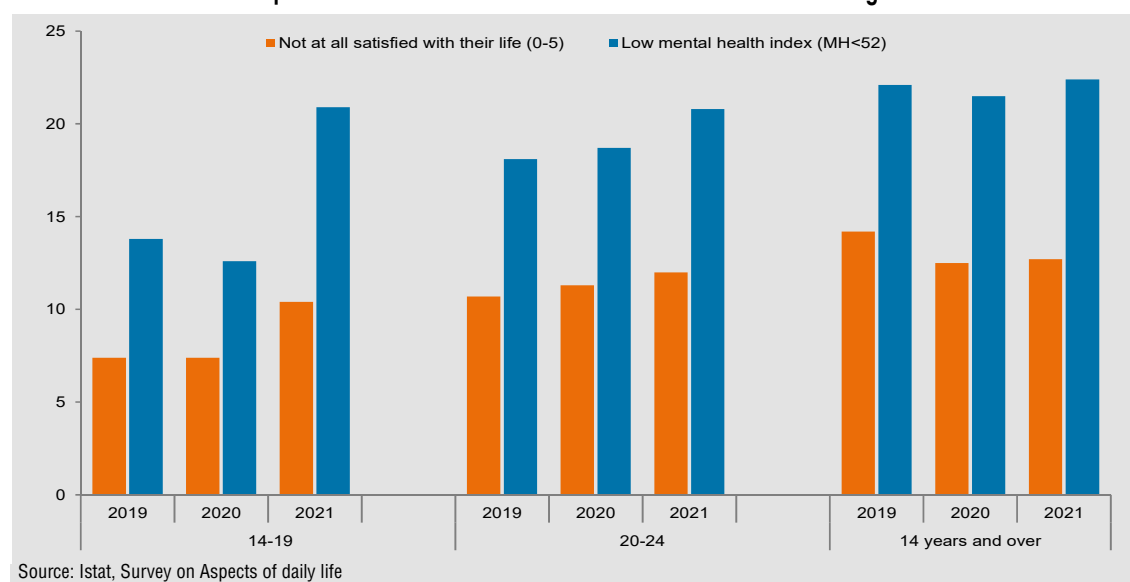
Almost 220,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 19 felt unsatisfied with their lives and experienced poor psychological well-being

The fragile situation of young people became even more acute in the second year of the pandemic and also emerged from the analyses presented in other chapters of the Report⁴. In 2020, the decline in the percentage of very satisfied with life was only slight, but in 2021 it was accompanied by an increase from 7.4% to 10.5% in the proportion of 14-19-year-olds expressing a level of dissatisfaction with their life (rating between 0 and 5). The share of those expressing such a low rating also increased in 2021 among 20-24-year-olds, but with a smaller change, while it decreased in all other population groups.

The observed increase in the proportion of 14-24-year-olds who are dissatisfied with their lives (rating 0-5) was also accompanied by an increasing proportion of young people with poor mental health (mental health indicator score⁵ below the first quintile of the distribution, i.e. 52 points). In fact, the percentage of adolescents with poor mental health conditions rose from 13.8% in 2019 to 20.9% in 2021; it also increased slightly among 20-24-year-olds, while it remained stable in the population as a whole (Figure 5).

The joint analysis of life satisfaction and mental health index showed that, among the teens who are dissatisfied with their lives, almost 60% have a MH score below the threshold that defines low psychological well-being; in 2019 this percentage was 44%. Therefore, while dissatisfied adolescents with a low mental health score were 3.2% of the total in 2019, in 2021 this percentage was doubled (6.2%), with approximately 220,000 14-19-year-olds dissatisfied with their lives and, at the same time, with a poor psychological well-being, indicating an increase in the precarious psychological situation.

Figure 5. People aged 14-19 and 20-24 who gave a score between 0 and 5 to their life satisfaction and have a score lower to the first quintile for the mental health index. Years 2019-2021. Percentages



⁴ See chapters on Health, Education and training and Social relationships.

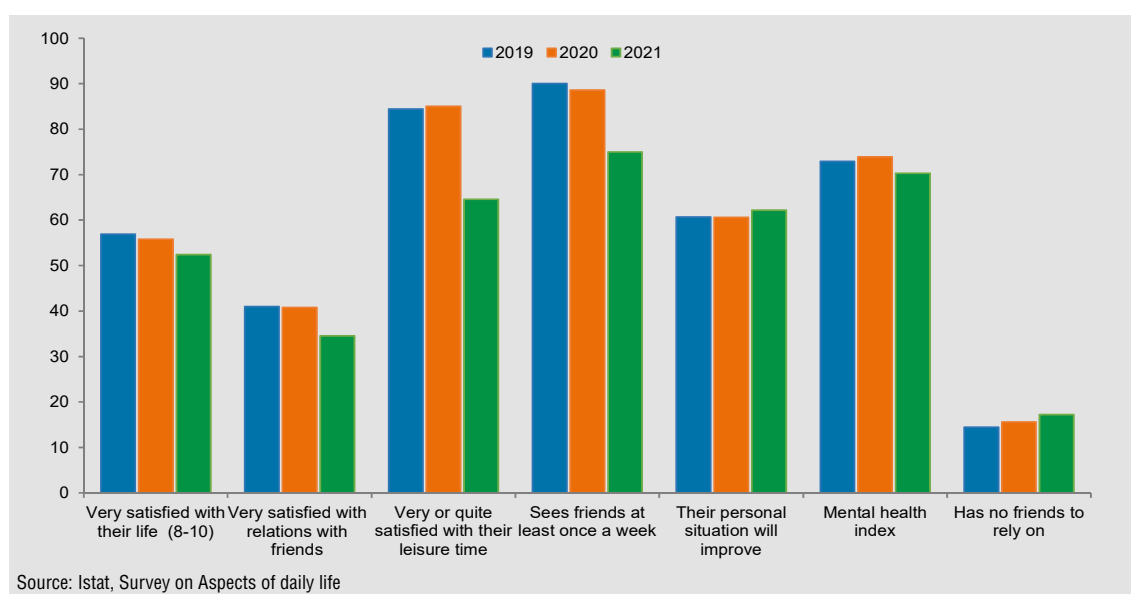
⁵ The MH score takes values between 0 and 100, where 100 indicates the best mental health condition.

Deterioration of adolescents' subjective well-being and social relationships

Cultivating positive friends relations is crucial for adolescents to develop their identity and quality of life.

A joint analysis of the trends in the indicators of Subjective well-being with those of psychological well-being and some indicators of Social relationships for 14-19-year-olds shows how their condition has been critical in the two years of pandemic. The fall in the percentage of very satisfied with life was in fact, as seen, accompanied by the fall in the average score on the mental health index, but also by the fall in leisure time satisfaction (19.8 percentage points less in 2021 than in 2019). Travel restrictions led to a 15-point decrease in the share of young people who saw their friends at least once a week in their free time, and more than twice as many as in previous years said they saw their friends only a few times a month (20.4%). Unlike leisure time satisfaction, the frequency with which they saw their friends decreased in 2020, but less markedly than in 2021. The percentage of those who said they had no friends they could count on in case of need also increased, rising to 17.2% among the youngest (it was 14.4% in 2019), while the share of those who said they were very satisfied with their friends relations fell by 6.5 percentage points (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Selected subjective well-being, psychological well-being and social relationship indicators for people aged 14-19. Years 2019-2021. Percentages and mean score (MH index)



The share of adolescents satisfied with both leisure time and friends relations decreased

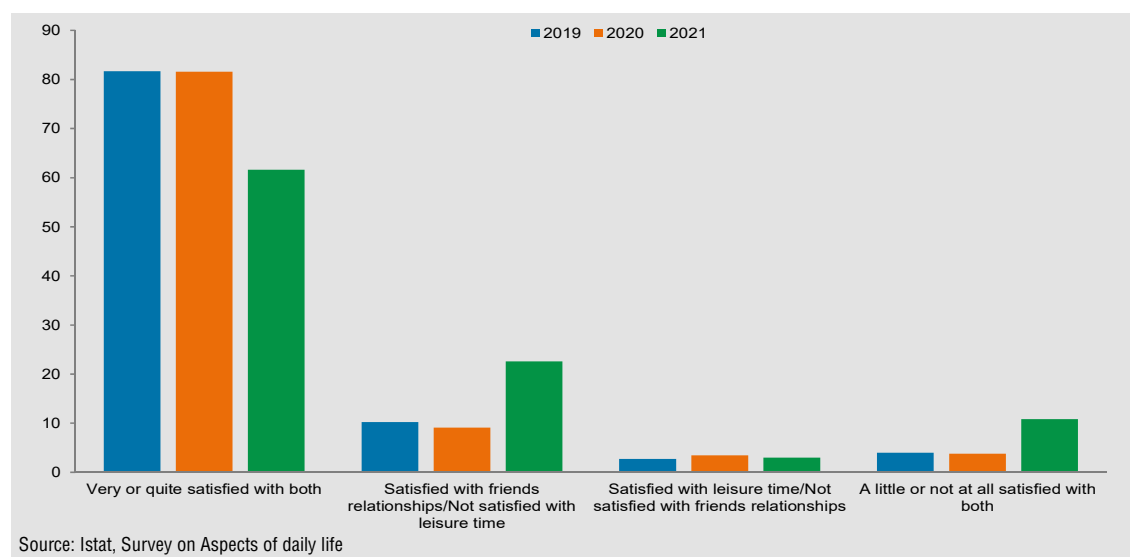
Leisure time satisfaction has always been closely correlated with satisfaction with friends relations over the years, with the majority of people aged 14 and over stating that they were very or fairly satisfied with both leisure time and friends relations. However, in 2021 the share of those satisfied with both aspects dropped to 50.1% from 63.1 in 2019, with an even more pronounced decline for the very young (14-19 years), among whom the share fell from 81.7% in 2019 to 61.6% in 2021 (Figure 7). In general, the share of people who

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were satisfied with their friends relations but not satisfied with their leisure time increased, and among the very young the share more than doubled to 22.6%. The share of very young people satisfied with neither leisure time nor friends relations rose to 10.9%, more than doubling.

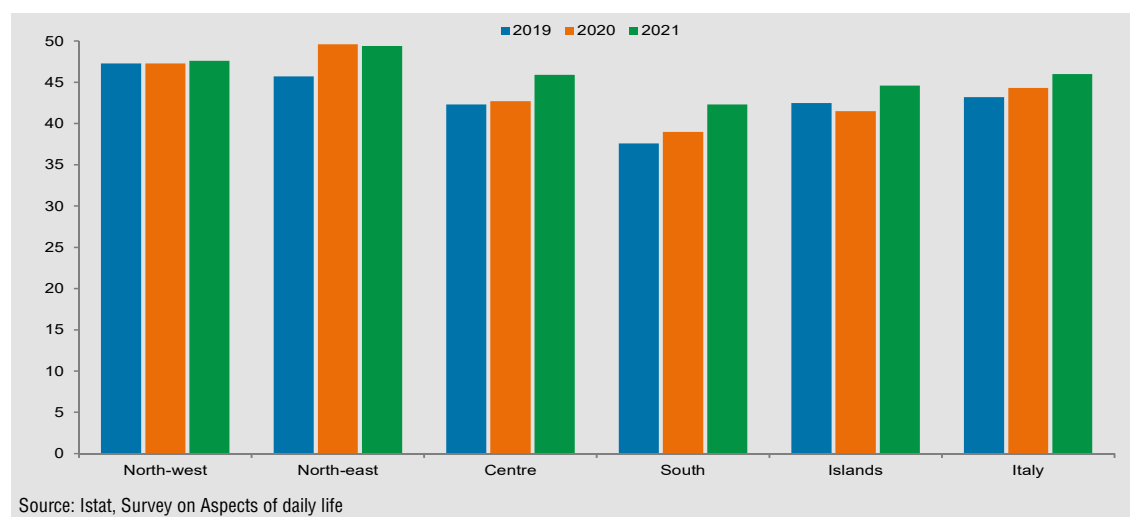
Figure 7. Satisfaction with leisure time and with friends relationships. Years 2019-2021. Per 100 persons aged 14-19 with the same characteristics



The North-west dropped behind comparing to previous years for subjective well-being indicators

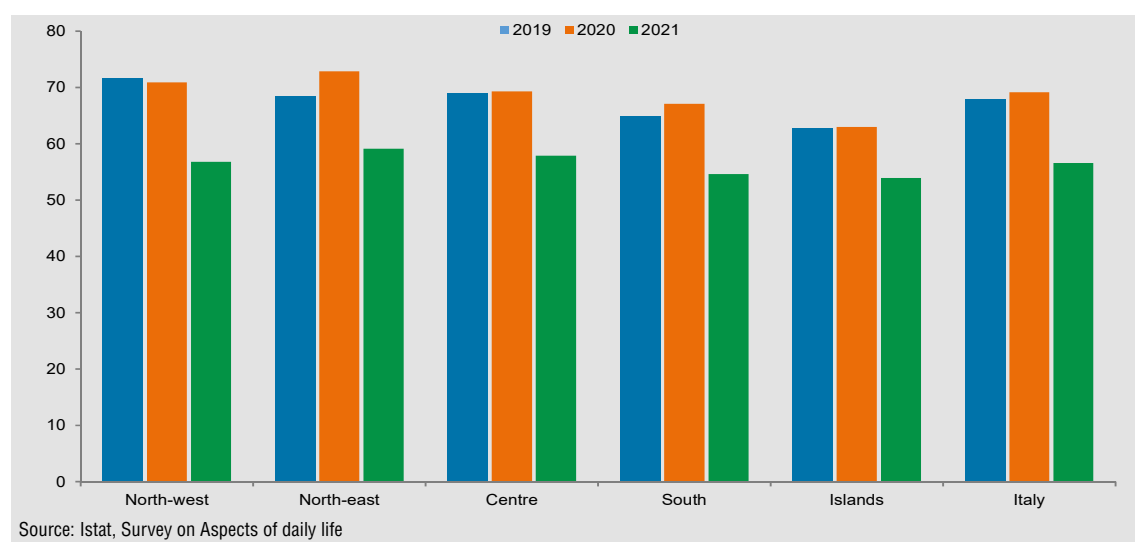
In the North-west of the country, which was most affected by *COVID-19*, the percentage of those very satisfied with life did not increase in the two years of the pandemic, remaining at levels just above 47%, unlike in the other areas (Figure 8). Although the North remains the area with the highest share of very satisfied (48.3%), the gap with the South and Islands decreased from 7.5 percentage points in 2019 to 5.3 in 2021.

Figure 8. People aged 14 and over expressing a high score (8-10) of life satisfaction, by geographic area. Years 2019-2021. Percentages



In terms of leisure time satisfaction, the drop in 2021 was also particularly evident in the North: it fell by 14.2 percentage points compared to 2020 in the North-west, to 56.7%, and by 13.8 points in the North-east, to 59.1% (Figure 9). On the contrary, it was lower in the Islands (down 9.1 percentage points) although this area still recorded the lowest value (53.9% in 2021). Moreover, if the difference between the figure for men (59%) and that for women (54.3%) reached 4.7 points in 2021, the North-east recorded the greatest increase from 1.3 to 4.4 points, following the decrease of 15.3 points in the percentage of satisfied women. In this same territorial unit, the greatest increase in the number of satisfied people was recorded in 2020 compared to 2019, but the previous growth had a decelerating effect on the subsequent decline only for the male component.

Figure 9. People aged 14 and over who say they are very or fairly satisfied with their leisure time, by geographic area. Years 2019-2021. Percentages



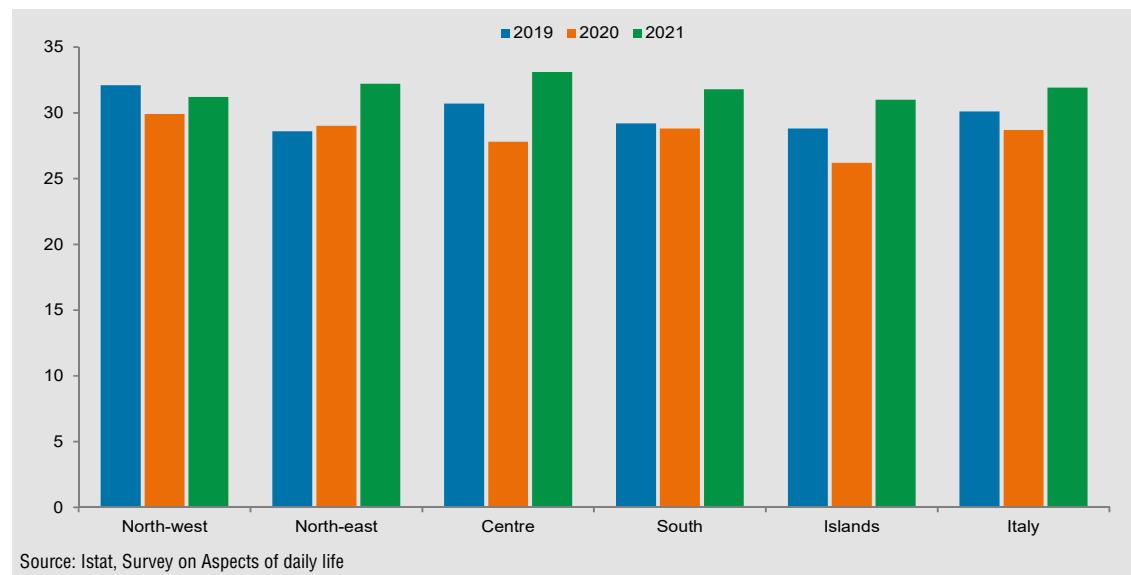
With regard to the assessment of one's own future prospects, in 2020 the highest value was in the North-west (29.9%), while in 2021 the increase in this area was only 1.4 points. It was therefore people resident in this geographical area, together with residents on the Islands, who showed the lowest levels of optimists (around 31%). At the same time, the Islands recorded the lowest level of pessimists (8.3%), while the highest percentage was recorded in the North-east (11.8%), particularly among women (12.8%). People living in the Centre were those who most frequently expressed an optimistic outlook (33.1%), an increase of 5.3 points compared to 2020 (Figure 10).

The territorial differences can also be explained by the gap between the evaluations expressed by men and women; in fact, we find the widest gender *gap* precisely in the North-west (5.8 percentage points less among women, compared to 4.0 points of difference for Italy as a whole), the lower percentage of optimists in this breakdown, therefore, seems to be largely due to the deterioration in the opinion expressed by women.

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Figure 10. People aged 14 and over who think their situation will improve in the next 5 years by geographic area. Years 2019-2021. Percentages



Indicators

- 1. Life satisfaction:** Percentage of people aged 14 and over very or quite satisfied with their leisure time on total population aged 14 and over.
Source: Istat - Survey on Aspects of daily life.
- 2. Leisure time satisfaction:** Percentage of people aged 14 and over very or quite satisfied with their leisure time on total population aged 14 and over.
Source: Istat - Survey on Aspects of daily life.
- 3. Positive judgement of future perspectives:** Percentage of people aged 14 and over that believe their personal situation will improve in the next 5 years on total population aged 14 and over.
Source: Istat - Survey on Aspects of daily life.
- 4. Negative judgement of future perspectives:** Percentage of people aged 14 and over that believe their personal situation will worsen in the next 5 years on total population aged 14 and over.
Source: Istat - Survey on Aspects of daily life.

Indicators by region and geographic area

REGIONS GEOGRAPHIC AREAS	Life satisfaction (a)	Leisure time satisfaction (a)
	2021	2021
Piemonte	45.6	56.2
Valle d'Aosta/Vallée d'Aoste	51.7	61.6
Liguria	46.0	56.7
Lombardia	48.5	56.9
Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol	60.8	66.1
<i>Bolzano/Bozen</i>	63.0	66.9
<i>Trento</i>	58.6	65.3
Veneto	48.5	59.1
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	49.2	56.8
Emilia-Romagna	47.7	58.1
Toscana	47.2	58.0
Umbria	43.4	57.7
Marche	44.4	60.5
Lazio	45.5	57.1
Abruzzo	45.9	58.3
Molise	45.5	59.0
Campania	40.6	51.9
Puglia	39.5	53.5
Basilicata	42.4	55.6
Calabria	49.6	59.7
Sicilia	43.2	52.6
Sardegna	48.7	57.9
North	48.3	57.7
North-west	47.5	56.7
North-east	49.4	59.1
Centre	45.8	57.9
South and Islands	43.0	54.2
South	42.2	54.4
Islands	44.6	53.9
Italy	46.0	56.6

(a) Per 100 persons aged 14 anni and over.

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Positive judgement of future perspectives (a)	Negative judgement of future perspectives (a)
2021	2021
29.4	13.1
33.3	12.4
28.1	12.0
32.6	9.2
30.2	9.9
29.3	10.0
31.0	9.8
32.3	11.7
30.9	13.3
33.0	12.1
30.2	10.6
31.7	11.4
29.0	13.2
36.2	10.6
31.0	9.5
27.6	11.8
35.9	7.5
27.8	9.2
31.2	9.9
29.5	8.4
29.1	8.1
36.4	8.7
31.7	11.1
31.3	10.5
32.2	11.8
33.1	11.0
31.6	8.4
31.8	8.5
31.0	8.3
31.9	10.2

