

## 8. Subjective well-being<sup>1</sup>

Subjective well-being is one of the fundamental dimensions on which the Bes framework is based. It provides a synthetic assessment of well-being through the evaluations and perceptions that individuals express about their lives in general and in specific areas.

In Italy, life satisfaction levels are lower than the European average, although showing a general improvement in recent years. Despite the strong impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on everyone's life, the indicators of satisfaction do not worsen in 2020. This is probably because the comparison with the difficult context surrounding us has led people to relativise the judgement on the quality of their life, with a slightly positive effect on the percentage of those who consider themselves to be very satisfied with their life. The impact of the uncertainty of the current situation, from the point of view of health, economic conditions and labour market, emerges instead when considering indicators on future prospects, with higher proportions of the population being concerned about the next five years. A concrete assessment of the effects of the pandemic on the components of subjective well-being will be possible only in a few years' time.

The analysis of the indicators in the domain examines the various aspects by population groups in order to highlight, from a cross-sectional perspective, critical points and strengths.

### Slight increase in the proportion of people who are very satisfied with their lives, but growing concern about future prospects

In 2020, less than half of the population (44.5%) rate their lives positively, giving a score between 8 and 10 to their life satisfaction. In the European comparison, which was only possible until 2018, the average life satisfaction score in Italy is among the lowest (see Bes Report 2019), with an improving trend since 2017, which was not interrupted in the year of the pandemic. Even in 2020, in fact, a slight increase in the percentage of very satisfied with their lives is observed (it was 43.2% in 2019).

In contrast, the critical situation brought about in the Country by the COVID-19 epidemic has had a negative impact on future prospects. Indeed, the percentage of people who believe that their situation will improve in the next five years (30.1% in 2019) has fallen to 28.9%, after growing steadily since 2016. At the same time, the percentage of individuals who believe their situation will worsen in the next 5 years, after years of decline, increases in 2020 in the Centre-North.

This seems to highlight that while the pandemic has led individuals to relativise their situation in relation to the current context, it is perceived as an event whose effects will influence future prospects.

Many hypotheses can explain these trends. Some factors, identified in previous studies, that may mitigate the impact of the perceived severity of the epidemic situation on well-being are an increased sense of community<sup>2</sup> and the capacity of self-control as a resilience factor<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This chapter was edited by Leonardo Salvatore Alaimo and Alessandra Tinto, with contributions from: Lorena Di Donatantonio and Romina Fraboni.

<sup>2</sup> Lau, A.L., I. Chi, R.A. Cummins, T.M. Lee, K.L. Chou, and L.W. Chung. 2008. The SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) pandemic in Hong Kong: Effects on the subjective wellbeing of elderly and younger people. *Aging and Mental Health*, Volume 12, Issue 6: 746–760.

<sup>3</sup> Li, J.-B., A. Yang, K. Dou, and R.Y. Cheung. 2020. Self-control moderates the association between perceived severity

A further aspect that deserves attention is the mechanism of formulating judgements of satisfaction on the basis of one's own life experiences and knowledge of the experiences of others which are taken as reference<sup>4</sup>. Especially in the initial period of the pandemic, the comparison with the situation around us may have led to a shift upwards of one's own scale of judgement. Other elements that may have played a role are subjective aspects related to satisfaction with family ties. The lockdown period, which forced people to stay at home, was also an opportunity to experience everyday life within the family, and for parents to spend more time with their children, as confirmed by the results of the "Diary of the day and activities at the time of the coronavirus' survey"<sup>5</sup>. This hypothesis would not only explain the general increase in life satisfaction, but would also provide an explanation for the drop in the percentage of people who are very satisfied observed among those living alone.

### Decreased percentage of very satisfied with life among people living alone and among the self-employed

The trend described in the last year is common to the different population groups; however, there are some critical situations. In particular, the percentage of people who are very satisfied decreases comparing to 2019 among people who live alone. Only 35.8% of them (it was 37.3% in 2019) refer to be very satisfied with their lives compared, for example, with almost half of those living in a family of four (Figure 1). Isolation due to lockdown affected those living alone the most, and the share of very satisfied fell, in particular, among adults living alone (e.g. between 2019 and 2020 the share fell by 9 percentage points among women and 10 points among men aged 55-59), but also among young women aged 20-34 living alone (-17 p.p. compared to 2019) and among men aged 65 and over (-4 p.p.).

Moreover, while the proportion of those who are very satisfied increases among the employees, it decreases among self-employed women, going from 45.1% to 42.9%.

A further critical element for employed people emerges with reference to the percentage of those who believe that their situation will improve in the next 5 years, which falls particularly among this population group, and even more so among the self-employed (among whom it falls from 36.5% in 2019 to 31.2% in 2020), who are probably affected by the perception of greater insecurity in their jobs.

Differences by employment status remain marked: among the unemployed the share of those who are very satisfied with their lives is considerably lower than among the employed (-20 points among males, -13 points among females). The positive change recorded in 2020, however, is transversal by employment status, further confirming the hypothesis that, also in this case, other aspects guiding individual evaluations had a relatively higher weight than objective aspects.

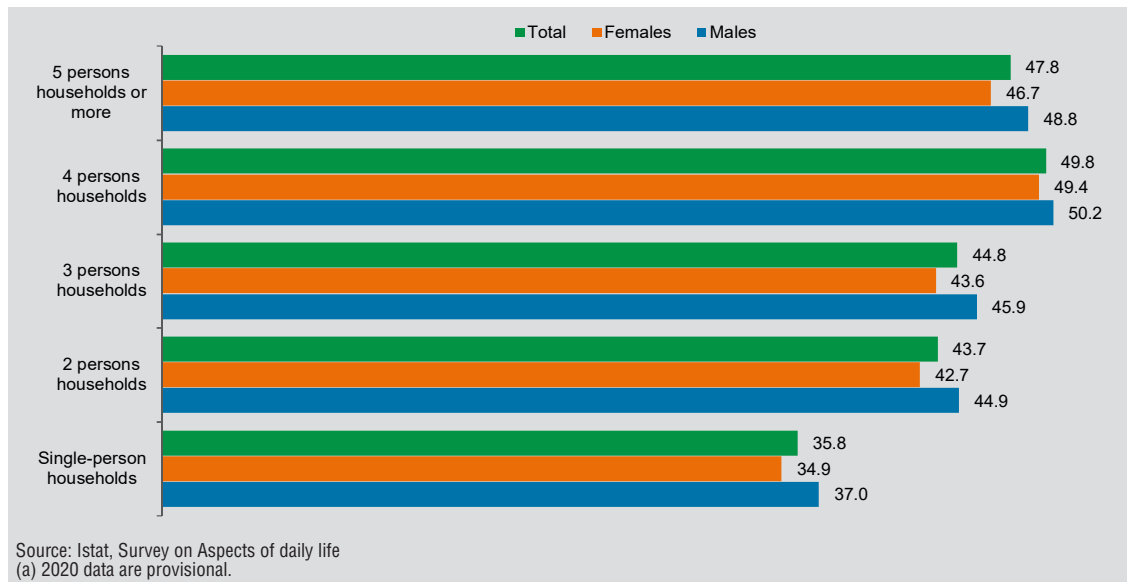
of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and mental health problems among the Chinese public. PsyArXiv. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/2xadq>.

4 Sen, A. 2002. Health: perception versus observation. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 324(7342): 860-861. Beegle, K., K. Himelein, and M. Ravallion. 2012. Frame-of-reference bias in subjective welfare. *Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization*, Volume 81, Issue 2: 556-570.

5 <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/243357>.

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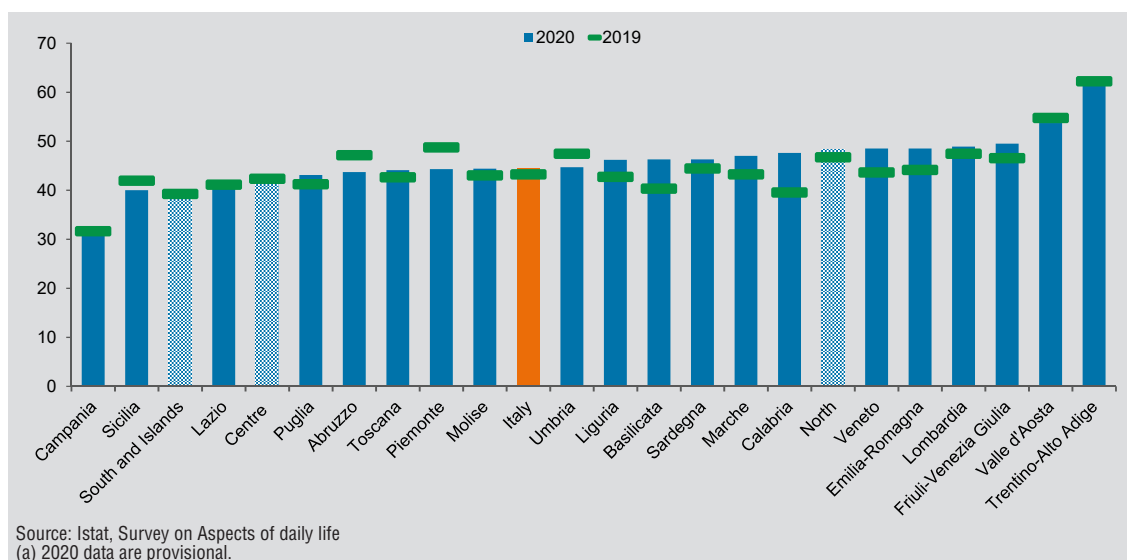
**Figure 1. People aged 14 and over expressing a high score (8-10) of life satisfaction, by number of household members and gender. Year 2020 (a). Percentage values**



### With the exception of Piemonte and Abruzzo, life satisfaction does not fall, but the percentage of pessimists increases in the North and in the Centre

Beyond the differences in levels, the increase in life satisfaction in 2020 is common to all areas of the Country, with some exceptions at regional level. Again, the absence of a negative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on life satisfaction seems to be confirmed. Despite the fact that it was mainly the northern regions that suffered the dramatic consequences of the first wave of the pandemic, all of them show higher than the national average values and almost all of them register an improvement compared to the previous year (with the exception of Piemonte, which goes from 48.7% in 2019 to 44.3% in 2020).

**Figure 2. People aged 14 and over expressing a high score (8-10) of life satisfaction, by region and geographic area. Years 2019-2020 (a). Percentage values**

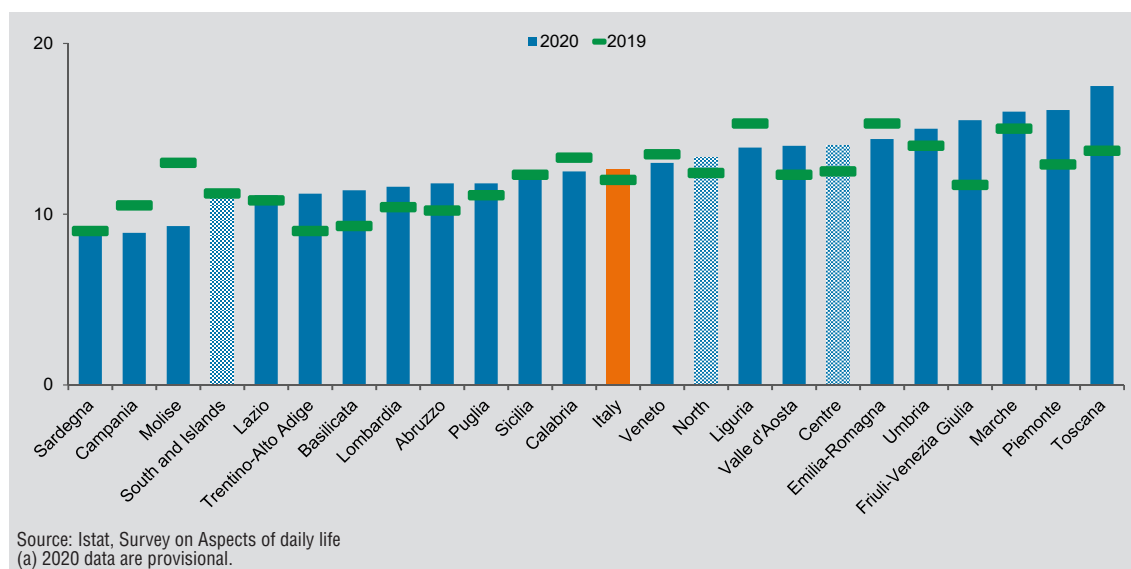


Apart from Piemonte, only in Abruzzo a significant worsening in the value of this indicator is recorded, going from 47.1% in 2019 to 43.7% (Figure 2)<sup>6</sup>.

The known differences across regions are thus maintained, with a higher percentage of people who are very satisfied with their lives in the North (48.4%), almost 4 percentage points higher than the national average, and lower levels in the Centre and in the South and Islands (the percentage is, respectively, 43% and 40%).

While there are no substantial territorial differences compared to 2019 in the variation in the positive assessment of future prospects, the percentage of people who assess them negatively is increasing in the North (13.3%, an increase of 1 percentage point compared to 2019) and in the Centre (14%, an increase of 1.5 percentage points) (Figure 3). The COVID-19 pandemic, which, at least in the first phase, mainly affected the Central-Northern regions of the Country, seems to have left its mark on individuals' concern about their future prospects.

**Figure 3. People aged 14 and over who think their situation will get worse in the next 5 years by region. Years 2019-2020 (a). Percentage values**



Regional data show the most significant increases in the share of pessimists compared to 2019 in Tuscany (up 4 percentage points), Friuli-Venezia Giulia (up almost 4 percentage points) and Piedmont (up from 12.9% to 16%). At the opposite, in Molise the share of pessimists significantly drops (from 13% to 9.3%).

### The gap between the subjective well-being of young and old people remains unchanged

The percentages of people who are very satisfied with their lives are stable or slightly improved compared to the previous year for all age groups, especially among people aged 35-54, registering an increase of 3 percentage points compared to the previous year. (Figure 4). At the same time, people aged 35-44 recorded the largest drop in the share of optimists over the two-years (less than 2 percentage points compared with 2019) (Figure 5).

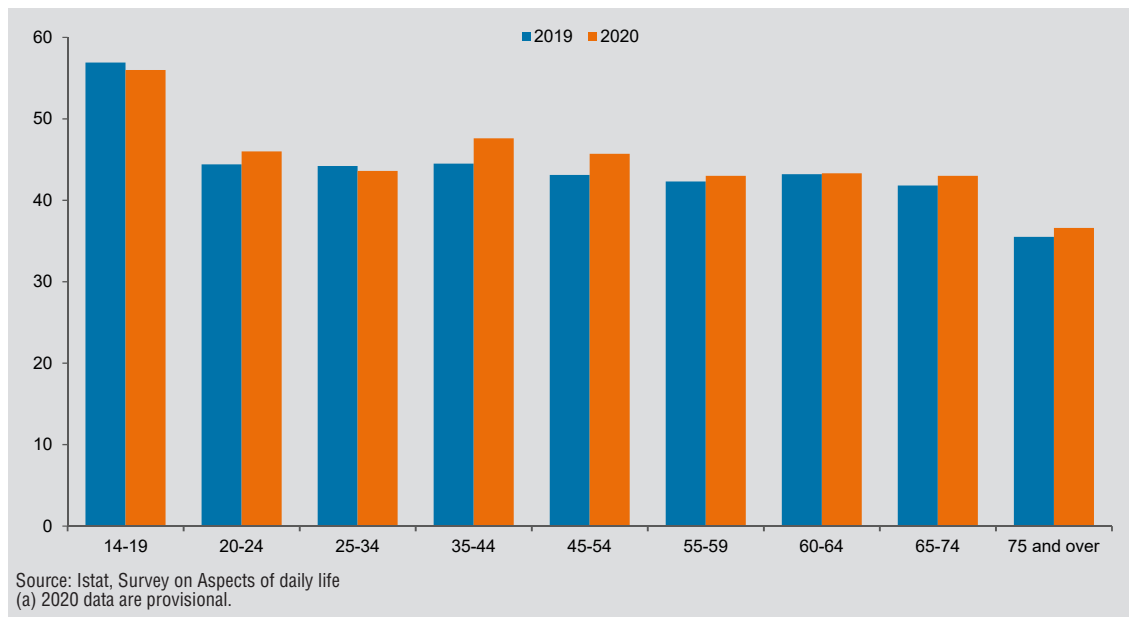
The gap between the highest (people aged 14-19, with the 56%) and the lowest percentage

<sup>6</sup> Differences by less than 1 percentage point are not to be considered statistically significant.

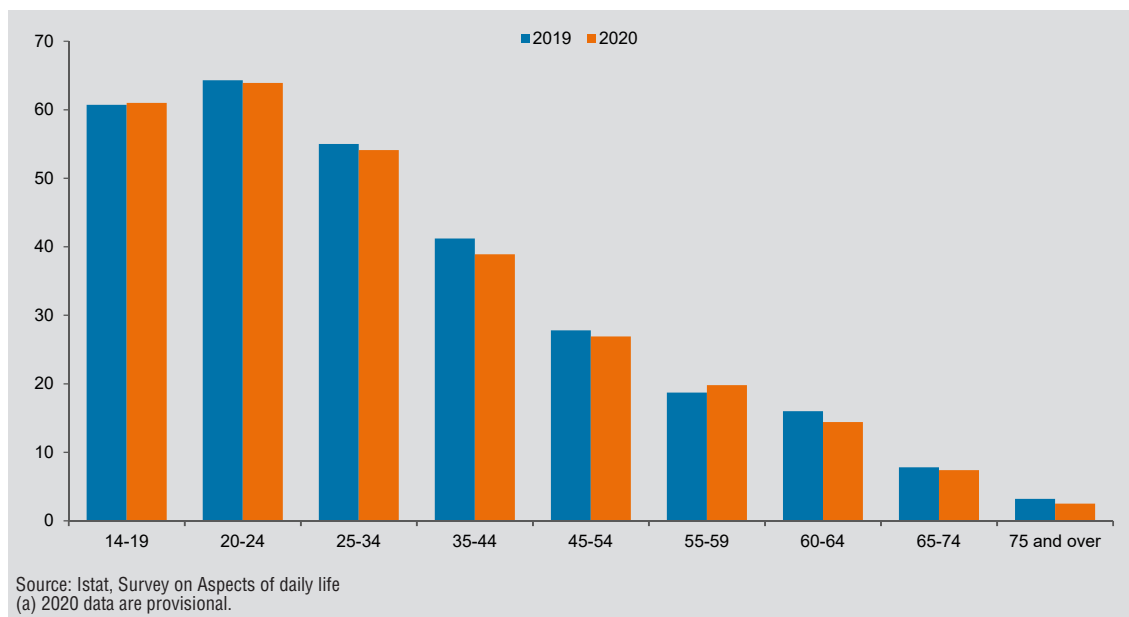
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of satisfied (people aged 75 and over, with the 36.6%) remains almost unchanged, with a gap of almost 20 percentage points. Expectations of improvement also remain much higher among young people, while they decline as they get older: almost two out of three young people aged 20 to 24 (63.9%) express a positive view of their future prospects, falling to just 2.5% among the people aged 75 and over.

**Figure 4. People aged 14 and over expressing a high score (8-10) of life satisfaction by age groups. Years 2019-2020 (a). Percentage values**



**Figure 5. People aged 14 and over who think their situation will improve in the next 5 years by age groups. Years 2019-2020 (a). Percentage values**



**Gaps by educational qualification in life satisfaction and judgement for the future remain wide**

The trend of a general increase in the share of very satisfied with life and a decrease in the share of optimists is similar between men and women and by educational attainment.

The tendency for women to have lower percentages of very satisfied and optimistic than men is confirmed. In 2020, the 43.4% of women said they were satisfied with their lives compared with the 45.7% of men; similarly, the 27.3% of women were positive about their future prospects compared with the 30.7% of men.

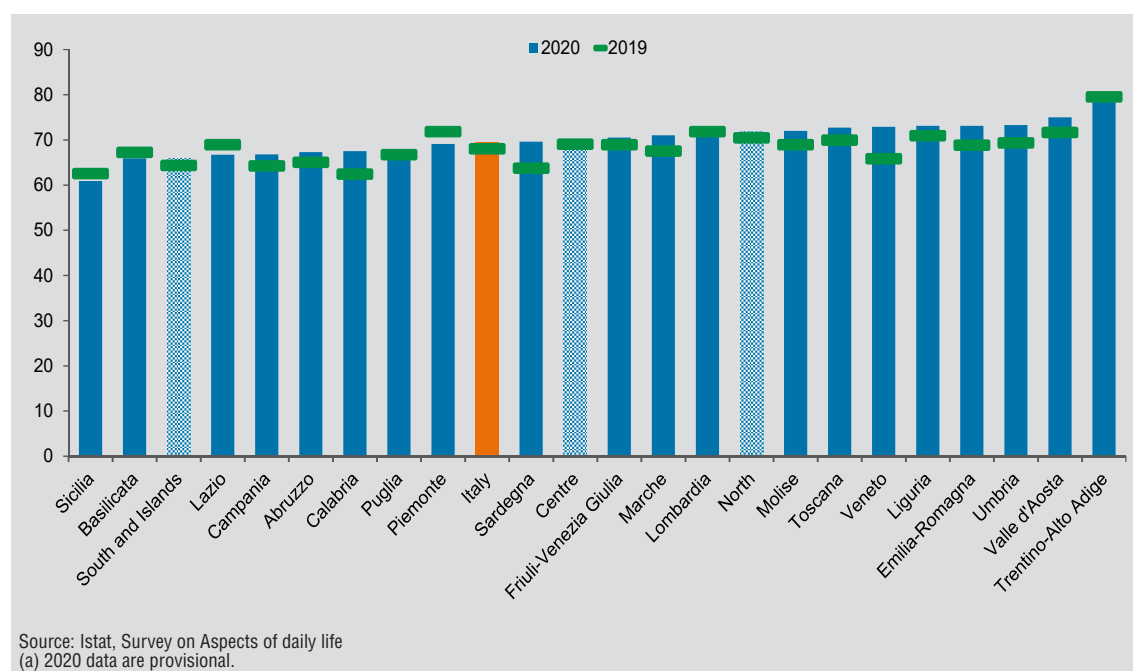
The gaps by educational attainment remain wide, with half of university graduates judging themselves to be very satisfied with their lives (compared with 41.7% of those with at most a secondary school leaving certificate). We also observe higher percentages of positive judgements about future prospects among those with a high educational qualification (39.7%) than among those with a low educational qualification (20.7%).

### Increased satisfaction with leisure time

An important dimension of quality of life is the leisure time. The data on the percentage of individuals who say they are very or fairly satisfied with their leisure time confirms what has been examined in the previous pages regarding satisfaction with their own life.

The 69.4% of people aged 14 and over say they are satisfied with their leisure time in 2020 with respect to the 68% in 2019, continuing the upward trend observed since 2017, when the percentage was 65.6%. The positive assessment probably stems from the greater availability of leisure time brought about in many cases by the closure due to measures to combat the spread of Covid-19 contagion.

Figure 6. People aged 14 who say they are very or fairly satisfied with their leisure time, by region and geographic area. Years 2019-2020 (a). Percentage values



This indicator also shows significant territorial differences: in the North, the values are

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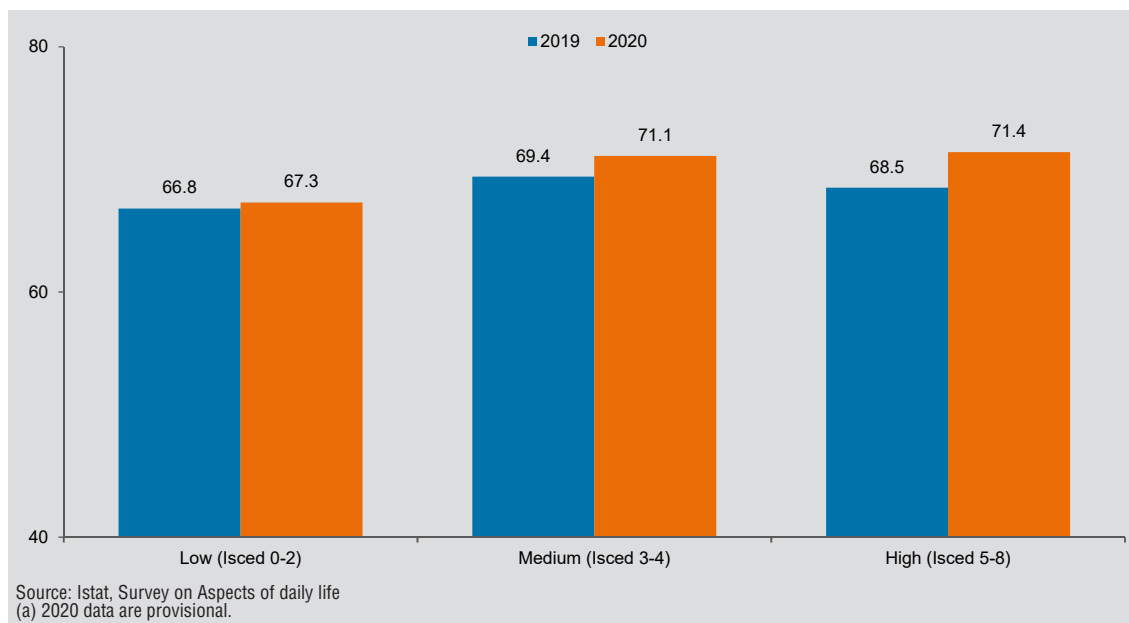
higher (71.9%) than in the Centre (69.6%) and, above all, in the South (65.9%). However, once again, data improves compared to the previous year in all geographical areas.

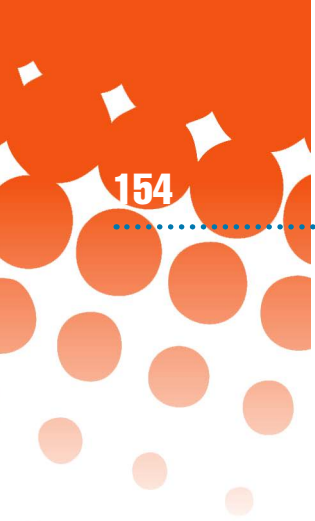
Regional data show in all regions a slight improvement or stability compared to 2019, with the exception of Piedmont, where there is a significant worsening in the percentage of people satisfied with their leisure time (from 71.8% to 69.1%) (Figure 6).

Men (71.2%) are more satisfied with their leisure time than women are (67.7%), with a gap of almost 5 percentage points at national level; however, the upward trend compared to 2019 is confirmed in both cases.

Satisfaction with leisure time is the highest among 14-19 year olds (85%), while it is the lowest among 55-59 year olds (64.2%). For all age groups, the percentages are stable or slightly improved compared with the previous year. Almost two-thirds of those with a high or medium educational qualification (71%) say they are very or fairly satisfied with their leisure time, far ahead of those with a low educational qualification (67.3%). The increase compared with 2019 is more significant among the better-educated (almost 3 percentage points higher) (Figure 7).

**Figure 7. People aged 14 who say they are very or fairly satisfied with their leisure time by level of education. Years 2019-2020 (a). Percentage values**







### Indicators

- 1. Life satisfaction:** Percentage of people aged 14 and over with a level of life satisfaction from 8 to 10 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 which 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 which 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 AND GEOGRAPHIC AREAS	Life satisfaction (a)	Leisure time satisfaction (a)
	2020 (*)	2020 (*)
Piemonte	44.3	69.1
Valle d' Aosta/Vallée d' Aoste	53.7	75.0
Liguria	46.2	73.1
Lombardia	48.9	71.4
Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol	62.2	78.4
<i>Bolzano/Bozen</i>	<i>62.7</i>	<i>79.3</i>
<i>Trento</i>	<i>61.6</i>	<i>77.4</i>
Veneto	48.5	72.9
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	49.5	70.5
Emilia-Romagna	48.5	73.1
Toscana	44.1	72.7
Umbria	44.7	73.3
Marche	47.0	71.0
Lazio	41.1	66.7
Abruzzo	43.7	67.3
Molise	44.4	72.0
Campania	31.7	66.8
Puglia	43.1	67.7
Basilicata	46.3	65.9
Calabria	47.6	67.5
Sicilia	40.0	60.9
Sardegna	46.3	69.6
North	48.4	71.9
Centre	43.0	69.6
South and Islands	40.0	65.9
<b>Italy</b>	<b>44.5</b>	<b>69.4</b>

(a) Per 100 persons aged 14 and over; (\*) Provisional data.

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Positive judgement future perspectives (a)	Negative judgement future perspectives (a)
2020 (*)	2020 (*)
27.0	16.1
30.7	14.0
27.1	13.9
31.8	11.6
28.5	11.2
25.6	13.3
31.3	9.1
30.1	13.0
29.2	15.5
28.8	14.4
26.9	17.5
26.5	15.0
25.5	16.0
30.0	11.1
27.9	11.8
25.5	9.3
31.5	8.9
29.1	11.8
27.7	11.4
24.0	12.5
24.2	12.4
32.6	8.8
29.8	13.3
28.2	14.0
28.2	10.9
<b>28.9</b>	<b>12.6</b>