

Governments and wellbeing

Recently a brilliant article by Derek Thompson appeared in *The Atlantic*. [A World Without Work](#) described the profound impacts of job losses experienced in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1977 when the city's formerly prosperous steel mills were forced to close. Fifty thousand jobs and US\$1.3 billion in manufacturing wages were lost within five years, transforming the city into a hub of unemployment and 'regional depression'. Over the following decade cultural and psychological impacts became obvious in rising rates of depression, spousal abuse, suicide rates, and crime. According to John Russo, professor of labour studies at Youngstown State University, "Youngstown's story is America's story, because it shows that when jobs go away, the cultural cohesion of a place is destroyed. The cultural breakdown matters even more than the economic breakdown".

Many governments now recognise the negative effects of cultural disconnection. In this post we describe two government-initiated wellbeing projects, one in the city of Santa Monica, California, and another in South Australia. Both governments aim to drive local policy and actions that will facilitate improved conditions in the communities. We conclude with some thoughts about the extent to which government ought to engage in wellbeing promotion.

The City of Santa Monica Wellbeing Project

The local government in Santa Monica, California is [creating a city for wellbeing](#) through an innovative [project](#) that helps government promote citizens' happiness. The Project uses [The Wellbeing Index](#) to measure the dimensions of, and ways to improve, local wellbeing. The six dimensions contributing to citizen wellbeing in Santa Monica are:

1. Outlook – personal sentiment and emotional health
2. Community – connectedness, support and safety
3. Place – natural, built and social environments
4. Learning – education, enrichment and life-long knowledge building
5. Health – physical and mental health and behaviours
6. Opportunity – affordability, economic security and business diversity

Santa Monica's local government has re-imagined its former role to include proactively investing in and supporting residents' wellbeing. Rather than focusing largely on economic aspects, measuring subjective experience and its outcomes will hopefully allow the government to develop relevant policies and programs to improve wellbeing. Anticipated benefits include the government's ability to develop partnerships with not-for-profits and business, to be data driven, and to work collaboratively with experts and community representatives.

It is impressive the Santa Monica government distinguishes between economic and wellbeing measures. However, we are cautious about how government programs, especially in the Outlook, Learning and Health dimensions, will be presented. Individual choice and self-determination are important, notwithstanding the value to be gained from nudges and [behavioural insights](#).

The SAHMRI Wellbeing and Resilience Centre, South Australia

The South Australian government is establishing a proactive public health initiative to build citizens' wellbeing and resilience as a component of mental and physical health. Using a positive psychology approach, the [Wellbeing and Resilience Centre](#) builds on existing research to “create new knowledge and practical, easily implemented wellbeing and resilience tools and programs that can be adopted across the community”. The Centre has four strategic areas of focus: education, young people, older people, and employment transition.

Perhaps workers' experiences in Youngstown, Ohio influenced the Centre's decision to undertake the Automotive Project in the strategic area of employment transition. Many employees in South Australia are in transition due to the loss of jobs in automobile manufacturing in the state. The government plans to proactively support employees to develop resilience skills and pathways to new futures, with a stated goal of protecting people against mental illness and potential effects of cultural breakdown following plant closures.

The project uses a set of [measures](#) to assess positive mental health in the community as well as social progress. Various [interventions](#) to 'prevent' mental and/or physical illness and improve health and wellbeing are proposed, including learning how to build positive emotion, developing 'growth mindset' skills, practising gratitude, and the importance of physical activity, good sleep and nutrition.

While the advantages of positive psychology have been proven in other situations, we question whether “practical, easily implemented wellbeing and resilience tools and programs” can protect against the pain of long-term unemployment. According to Thompson,

Research has shown that it is harder to recover from a long bout of joblessness than from losing a loved one or suffering a life-altering injury. The very things that help many people recover from other emotional traumas – a routine, an absorbing distraction, a daily purpose – are not readily available to the unemployed.

Observations

Where full time employment options are disappearing (as they are steadily in manufacturing, mining, retailing, service work, tertiary education, government departments, and some critical services) other scenarios are emerging. Thompson described that many former employees in Youngstown adjusted to a contingency model of work. The long-term casualised workforce is known as the *precariat*. Wollongong University's Dr Kate Bowles has written extensively about the impact of the precariat on higher education workers. She [points out](#) “the majority of Australia's higher education workers are now casually hired... [and this situation] is unlikely to reverse in the future”. Bowles provided a sobering assessment of institutional motivational programs offering assistance to displaced, casualised academic workers:

Institutional programs that motivate, reward, support and encourage are great. They deliver institutional quality assurance by the truckload. But they don't create sustainable careers, and they don't pay the rent. Meanwhile, the really serious harm from long-term casual employment lies well beyond their horizon of enthusiasm.

Support such as that proposed in South Australia's Automotive Project was not offered to displaced workers in Youngstown. Nevertheless, several forms of 'work' emerged since the auto industry collapse almost 40 years ago. Some people developed skills as artists, musicians, and handymen; now, most are employed part time at best. Other people created a portfolio of odd, part time and/or casual jobs. Some citizens participate in informal exchange or bartering networks, such as trading skills for vegetables grown in urban gardens. Consistent with how casual academics fare, John Russo [sees](#) Youngstown as the leading edge of the developing precariat in the US, where the "working class [...] swings from task to task in order to make ends meet and suffers a loss of labor rights, bargaining rights, and job security".

The reality of insecure income breeds a raft of negative psycho-societal impacts. Yet many Youngstown citizens have adapted to insecurity and poverty. In the wake of adaptation, new identities based on personal pride in their ability to handle contingency have emerged. Examples include increased confidence in entrepreneurial ventures, resourcefulness, independence, and resilience. One contingent worker reported that people who live in Youngstown are "devastatingly poor [yet] fearless and creative and phenomenal".

Conclusions

Two likely outcomes in a contingent future are reduced consumption and increased community creativity. Jobs eliminated by automation and wider systemic changes may never be replaced. Youngstown is an example of how residents were forced to re-imagine work options, alternative economies, and leisure in their community. The city's community spaces (based outside of homes and offices) have been central to fostering personal growth (e.g., flexibility and resilience), new skill development, and realising vocational 'passions'. The need for community wellbeing – or pursuing ways of "[surviving well together](#)" – is easier to see when wellbeing is differentiated from economic measures.

There are [dissenting opinions](#) about whether governments are morally responsible for promoting citizens' happiness using psychological or cognitive change interventions based on selected worldviews and values. Sociologist and political economist Will Davies recently wrote in his book *The Happiness Industry* that good intentions can segue into manipulative interventions. Davies criticised the UK government for making cognitive behavioural therapy a compulsory aspect of workfare programs, for example.

Youngstown's experience shows that human adaptation to dramatic change events can and does occur, although positive results take time to emerge. This is consistent with what is known about deep systemic change processes. Citizens' expanded emotional and vocational skills do not appear overnight. Resilience, fearlessness and resourcefulness result from personally confronting difficulties and living through the pain in order to grow. Development is a slow, hard won process but its payback can be a wider range of personal resources and capacities for living. Whether government wellbeing programs based on positive psychology can achieve comparable emotional development in a short time frame is yet to be revealed.

Davies echoes experiences discerned in Youngstown. He states “a politics of happiness requires institutions of voice where people can articulate their unhappiness with agency”. Put another way, people need values-neutral government support *and* a way to be heard. When governments really listen to citizens, people can speak with authority about what makes them unhappy or reduces their wellbeing. They can participate in deciding what government initiatives are likely to help. These factors enable adults to contribute democratically to urban and personal renewal in the wake of massive systemic disruption. They can then find ways of adjusting or creating alternative, reasonably satisfying versions of their lives. In Santa Monica and South Australia the jury is out as to whether the planned approaches will effectively address these core issues in community wellbeing.

About the Author

Joanne Abbey PhD is Director/Organisational Psychologist with the [Centre for Corporate Wellbeing](#). Her research investigated the meaning and outcomes of wellbeing at work. Given that ‘culture is strategy’ organisational wellbeing is a significant driver of personal and operational performance. Follow her on twitter [@wellbeingsavvy](#).