

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The importance of well-being research today with special regard to Hungary

Tamás Zoltán Wágner^{1,2}, Miklós Horváth^{1,2}, Tünde Fűrész^{1,2}, András Pári^{1,2,3,*}

¹Makovecz Campus Foundation - Collegium Professorum Hungarorum, 2081 Piliscsaba, Hungary

²Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families, 1016 Budapest, Hungary

³Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 1088 Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

The study provides a comprehensive review of the well-being research literature, presenting the diverse and partly divergent interpretations of the conceptual framework of well-being. The authors highlight that well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses a wide range of components—from physical and mental states to satisfaction and happiness, as well as assessments of one's own situation and that of the country. A comparison of international and domestic empirical studies makes it clear that well-being is significantly influenced by global crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war. Research shows that these crises temporarily reduced levels of happiness and life satisfaction, weakened feelings of health and safety, and that the extent of these effects varied considerably across social groups (e.g., women, the elderly, young people, urban residents, and those with low incomes). The study pays special attention to the role of material circumstances, age, place of residence, family status, as well as political preferences. The findings indicate that material circumstances are among the most influential determinants of well-being indicators, while age-related patterns are far more complex than the classical U-curve suggests and vary across countries. Analyses related to place of residence and family status also point to marked differences. Political attitudes are closely associated with well-being: respondents with pro-government or conservative orientations tend to report higher levels of satisfaction.

Keywords: well-being, happiness, satisfaction, COVID-19, Russo-Ukrainian war

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies address the well-being of the population both in Hungary and abroad. The monthly surveys conducted by Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families also examine well-being by using the following indicators: perceived happiness, life satisfaction, perceived health, perceived security and assessments of one's own and national situation. Although the concept seems relatively clear for ordinary people, experts examine the issue from different

perspectives and a certain degree of inconsistency can be observed in the use of the term. For this reason, it is worth taking a closer look at well-being research, in which we first clarify the conceptual issues before analysing them by using a specific set of criteria (such as the coronavirus pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian war, financial situation and age) to derive the main findings in the literature. At the end of the paper, we attempt to formulate forward-looking proposals based on the findings of various literature regarding the phenomenon of well-being and the future of well-being research.

*Corresponding Author:

András Pári, Makovecz Campus Foundation - Collegium Professorum Hungarorum, 2081 Piliscsaba, Hungary; Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families, 1016 Budapest, Hungary; Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 1088 Budapest, Hungary.

Email: pari.andras@koppmariaintezet.hu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3098-9863>

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CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF WELL-BEING

When we turn to conceptual issues, we immediately encounter difficulties with terminology: many experts - both in Hungarian and international literature - prefer to use the terms subjective well-being or even subjective quality of life instead of/in parallel with well-being (Vargha & Oláh, 2024; Perron *et al.*, 2021; Dolan *et al.*, 2011; Fináncz & Csima, 2020). However, it can also be observed that many experts use the concept of subjective well-being in a narrower sense and regard it primarily as the colloquial term for happiness (Vargha & Oláh, 2024). Some, however, consider this narrow approach to be unjustified and include joy, pleasure, and satisfaction with life, while others sharply distinguish the concept from happiness or standard of living and link it rather to the satisfaction of needs (Perron *et al.*, 2021). Interestingly, if we examine all this from the perspective of well-being, we can see that in the public discourse, the term is primarily used to refer to an individual's physical and mental well-being (subjective health status) (Fináncz & Csima, 2020). However, if we look at specific research on this topic, we can see that in practice, researchers use this concept in a much broader sense (Oross, 2013). There is no coherent standpoint in the literature regarding the use of the term. For the sake of simplicity, the three terms - especially well-being and subjective well-being - can be considered synonymous, as the only real debate among experts concerns the indicators constituting the concept. This argument is supported by Fináncz & Csima (2020), who first highlight the similarities between well-being and quality of life (both focus on subjective indicators when examining social well-being), and then conclude that since the general level of welfare is expressed by well-being, the three terms (well-being, subjective well-being, subjective quality of life) actually describe the same concept in practice, albeit from different perspectives. Therefore, based on the literature, the definition of the concept of well-being encompasses the subjective assessment of physical and mental status (including perceived health and security), level of satisfaction, level of happiness, the individual's assessment of their own situation and the individual's assessment of the country's situation.

In summary, the concepts of well-being, subjective well-being, and subjective quality of life can be used interchangeably in practice, although there are differences in emphasis.

Taken together, the lack of a coherent conceptual consensus suggests that well-being, subjective well-being, and subjective quality of life are used largely interchangeably in empirical research, with differences

primarily concerning the selected indicators. Well-being can therefore be defined as a multidimensional construct encompassing subjective evaluations of physical and mental health, happiness, life satisfaction, and assessments of both individual and societal conditions. In this respect, the present study implicitly builds on the classical subjective well-being (SWB) tradition (Diener, 1984), while extending it to macro-level perceptions—such as evaluations of the country's situation and political attitudes—thereby reflecting a broader, sociologically oriented conceptualization of well-being.

MAIN AREAS OF WELL-BEING RESEARCH - KEY INFLUENCING FACTORS

Before analysing the key influencing factors, it is worth emphasising the fact that the interpretability of the cited studies in this chapter has limitations which were considered when we derived the main findings of the paper. In this regard, it should be mentioned in the first place that we cited numerous Hungarian sources due to the specific topic of the paper and the Anglo-Saxon conceptual framework is overrepresented. If we look into the details, there are other methodological limitations as well. For instance, Havasi 2020 used a small online convenience sample, Pedersen *et al.* (2024) is a preprint and has not been peer-reviewed and the several cited think-tank reports have potential political biases. Nonetheless, the variety of the sources enabled us to draw significant conclusions and to formulate policy recommendations as well.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on happiness and satisfaction

Although well-being indicators are less reliable than income or education and depend to a large extent on the given situation, they are increasingly coming to the attention of sociologists and social researchers (Lelkes, 2014; Kulcsár, 2020). One of the most popular areas of research is the study of happiness and satisfaction indicators. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of happiness studies (Lubics *et al.*, 2024), which measure individuals' overall happiness with their lives or their happiness in different areas of life (Nistor, 2024; Helliwell *et al.*, 2025). Due to their close relationship, they are often treated together, but it is more appropriate to continue to examine them separately, since while happiness is related to the concept of hedonism (joy, pleasure, comfort), satisfaction is closer to the cognitive evaluation and assessment of well-being (Hudde & Jacob, 2025; Lubics *et al.*, 2024). Another argument in favor of separate examination is that happiness is the most subjective type of emotion, which also gives experience a unique character and indicates a sudden change in state, whereas satisfaction refers rather to the idea that life is generally good (Varga-Péterfi,

2023; Osváth, 2015). In addition to the study of happiness and satisfaction, research analyzing individuals' assessments of their own situation and their country is becoming increasingly important. This is largely due to the increased political relevance of surveys, which is well illustrated by the fact that various think tanks and other research institutes are keen to conduct and publish findings in this area, sometimes as part of larger research projects. These findings are then regularly used in subsequent political discourse to shape public debate. After clarifying the conceptual framework, we will focus our analysis on the aspects mentioned above and, in connection with this, on certain indicators. We will also examine the conclusions drawn by experts in previous studies.

If we look at the various aspects, it is worth starting with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. The effects of the coronavirus pandemic on satisfaction and happiness are widely discussed in the literature. Among other things, it shows that while the first six waves of the pandemic (until the summer of 2022) clearly resulted in a decline in life satisfaction, after that the indicators in most countries subsequently returned to pre-pandemic levels (Easterlin & O'Connor, 2023). In addition, workplace changes also affect life satisfaction, and increased remote working appears to have a less negative impact on parents than on non-parents (Kriechel *et al.*, 2024). Similar processes took place in the case of happiness, with people living in areas severely affected by the coronavirus pandemic reporting unhappiness much more frequently. The negative effects mainly affected women, the elderly, city dwellers, and low-income earners (Kamilçelebi, 2022). Specific research - based on data from a voluntary online survey of 16-75-year-olds in Germany - shows that after the lockdown, satisfaction with family life decreased significantly among fathers, mothers, and childless people. However, this cannot be explained by changes in employment (working from home, part-time work) or the slight decrease in job satisfaction observed. Job satisfaction declined primarily among mothers and childless people who had to switch to part-time work. However, the switch to part-time work increased fathers' satisfaction with family life (Möhring *et al.*, 2021). Looking at the relationship between the coronavirus pandemic and age, a questionnaire survey of nearly 500 older and younger people conducted in Germany and Poland involving older and younger people established that older people were more satisfied and happier during the coronavirus pandemic than younger people (Bidzan *et al.*, 2020). A study covering six countries (China, Japan, South Korea, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States), based on data from more than 6,000 respondents, showed that there was a correlation between the increase in coronavirus cases and happiness: as the number of cases rose, people's perceived happiness

decreased (Nguyen, 2021).

Overall, it can be concluded that the coronavirus pandemic initially reduced levels of happiness and satisfaction, but indicators in several countries returned to pre-pandemic levels. The impact varied among different social groups.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on perceived health

With regard to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on perceived health, it is important to note that movement restrictions, social distancing measures and fear of infection fundamentally changed people's perception of their own health, with studies typically showing negative trends: people rate their own health much worse than before the lockdowns. However, this general finding is weakened by the fact that the data is not compared with data from the pre-pandemic period, but is only collected retrospectively from people. Looking at different social groups, it appears that older people and women report the most deterioration, but similar trends can also be observed among unemployed persons and those with lower levels of education (Torrado *et al.*, 2022). Turning to specific research, a questionnaire based on online survey conducted in December 2021 using a quota method is noteworthy, which examined the reasons behind the rejection of the coronavirus vaccine among the Hungarian population aged 18-65 with internet access. Among other things, the research revealed a correlation between vaccine refusal and subjective health status: those who consider their own health to be better are also more likely to refuse the vaccine (Brys *et al.*, 2022). The results of an online survey involving a total of 937 people (aged 18 and over) from several countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Botswana) examining the relationship between health status and physical activity showed that men's level of physical activity at home was higher than that of women; those who exercised every day of the week did not rate their health as poor before the coronavirus restrictions; during the coronavirus restrictions, significantly more men than women rated their health as excellent or good and the coronavirus restrictions had a more negative impact on women's health (74% of men rated their health as excellent, compared to only 23% of women) (Nyawornota *et al.*, 2024). Interestingly, a field-based study conducted in Andalusia in April and May 2020, involving nearly 3,000 people and relying mainly on data from the 2020 Social Survey for Andalusia, contrary to initial expectations, revealed that the population's perceived well-being had generally improved, but that a deterioration had been observed among young people and those on low incomes (Torrado *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, most of the studies examined in relation to the

coronavirus pandemic and health perception showed a subjective deterioration in health, especially among the elderly and women, with regional differences also observed.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on perceived security

The coronavirus pandemic also affected people's perceived security, as many may have felt that their previously secure lives were falling apart. The pandemic shattered the public mood that technological advances would make future disasters predictable and avoidable. The spread of countless conspiracy theories, thanks to the internet, may also have contributed to the general decline in perceived security. The feeling of vulnerability primarily affected the elderly, pregnant women, families with children, people living alone and single parents, those who lost their jobs, low-income earners, the homeless, people with disabilities, and immigrants (Örkény, 2020). In this regard, a Canadian study is noteworthy, which showed that immigrants perceived twice as much ethnic/skin color-based harassment and attacks as members of the majority society. In this regard, Black and Asian people were particularly affected (Heidinger & Cotter, 2020). In terms of settlement size, it appears that during the coronavirus pandemic, perceived security in metropolitan areas decreased significantly due to higher population density and potentially larger populations. In contrast, this was not observed among people living in villages due to their smaller size, lower population density, and larger natural spaces (Csurgó & Kovách, 2023).

With regard to perceived security, it can be concluded that the coronavirus pandemic increased feelings of vulnerability, especially among vulnerable groups. The urban population experienced a greater decline in their perceived security than rural residents.

The effects of the Russo-Ukrainian war

In many ways, the Russo-Ukrainian war had a similar effect on people as the coronavirus pandemic. In terms of satisfaction and happiness, feelings of hopelessness and confinement are particularly noteworthy. As a Hungarian study about Generation Z shows, anxiety, negative thoughts and depression are becoming constant themes. At the same time, however, there is a growing need to slow down and a gradual shift toward a more positive outlook on life (Guld & Balázs, 2022). War has a negative impact on both physical and mental health and an increase in mental health risks is common (Esbit *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, this is true not only in the short term but also in the long term: a study examining the impact of World War II scorched earth tactics in Norway, conducted by surveying nearly 3,500 people born between 1925 and 1944, showed that the negative effects were still

observable 50 years later. Those who reported health problems due to the war were three times more likely to report poor health at the time of the study. This highlights the long-term health consequences of warfare affecting the civilian population, from which civilians suffering from the Russo-Ukrainian war are unlikely to be exempt (Pedersen *et al.*, 2024). The Russo-Ukrainian war has also generally shaken people's sense of security, especially in social groups such as Generation Z, who were primarily disturbed by the impossibility of long-term planning. Among them, family emerged as a point of certainty (Guld & Balázs, 2022). Another important question is how people in Ukraine's neighboring countries generally perceived the security situation. In this regard, we highlight a Polish study that examined the situation in the months immediately following the outbreak of the war. It showed that although a significant proportion of respondents feared that the war would have a negative impact on Poland's security situation and that there was a possibility of the war spreading to other countries, very few planned to leave the country or stockpile fuel (Kancik-Koltun, 2024).

The war, like the coronavirus pandemic, placed a significant psychological burden on people: anxiety increased as well as perceived security and health deteriorated. In this respect, young people are a particularly vulnerable group.

The role of financial circumstances

It is also worth examining the individual indicators in relation to financial status. For example, researchers have long been interested in the extent to which financial status correlates with happiness. Although we constantly find in the literature that money does not bring happiness, various studies point out that rich people are happier than poor people. There is a correlation between income, financial circumstances, and happiness, and a deterioration in financial circumstances negatively affects individual happiness. At the same time, material wealth only contributes to increased happiness up to a certain point (achieving a certain standard of living), after which it no longer has a demonstrable effect. In this context, it is worth noting that the level of happiness in the richest countries has not changed significantly since 1950 (Nagy *et al.*, 2022; Takács, 2005). A similar phenomenon can be observed in relation to life satisfaction, where limitations are also apparent: a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center showed that while satisfaction levels rose in both emerging markets and developing countries between 2007 and 2014, there was a slight decline in developed countries (Pew Research Center, 2014). There is also a close relationship between financial situation and subjective health status. The worse someone's financial situation is, the worse they rate their own health (Kopp & Martos, 2011; Kollányi,

2016; Vokó, 2011). In Hungary, for example, the 2009 European Health Interview Survey shows that people in very poor financial circumstances were six times more likely to rate their health as poor/very poor than those in very good financial circumstances. Furthermore, among those who stated that their financial situation was good or very good, 80% reported good or very good health, while among those in poor or very poor financial circumstances, this figure was around 40% (Bényi & Kéki, 2012). Internationally, a British study based on data from the Understanding Society UK Household Longitudinal Study between 2009 and 2019 showed that increasing family income and income stability are associated with good health. In contrast, people living in low-income households and those with unstable income reported poor health (Akanni *et al.*, 2022). A similar pattern can be seen in the relationship between financial situation and perceived security: the prevailing view in the literature is that a more favorable financial situation is associated with a higher perceived security. In this regard, it is worth referring to a study based on data from the European Social Survey database for Hungary between 2002 and 2018, which showed that while nearly 37% of those living in comfortable financial circumstances reported a high perceived security, only 18.4% of those living in very difficult circumstances reported the same, and 35.1% of them said they did not feel safe at all (Róbert, 2020).

Therefore, financial status is the strongest determinant of almost all indicators of well-being. It should be noted, however, that the relationship between income and happiness cannot be considered linear, as the correlation diminishes once a certain standard of living has been achieved.

The role of age

With regard to age, it is important to note that numerous studies examined the relationship between happiness indicators and whether any patterns emerge. For a long time, research claimed that a so-called U-curve could be observed between the ages of 40 and 50 (when values are at their lowest), but this depended largely on the use of control variables. However, the latest research - as confirmed by a study examining data from 30 predominantly European countries - shows that although this pattern is generally visible in individual countries, it is a much more complex issue than experts had previously assumed. For example, the minimum level of happiness can appear before the age of 40 and after the age of 50, and the classic U-curve is most noticeable in men. It is also interesting to note that while the increase in happiness in old age stops at the age of 70 for men, it continues for 10 years longer for women (Laaksonen, 2018). Basically, similar patterns can be observed in terms of satisfaction, *i.e.*, young and old people are

typically the most satisfied with their lives, while middle-aged people are the least satisfied (classic U-curve). Based on various studies, this pattern is primarily caused by major events associated with certain stages of life (marriage, childbirth) and the so-called cohort effect. At the same time, as with happiness, the classic U-curve is gradually beginning to flatten out, as the latest research shows that it appears to be much smoother thanks to the cohort effect, which means that between the ages of 20 and 55, the level of life satisfaction remains virtually unchanged (Kutubaeva, 2019). If we examine the issue at the level of individual countries, a questionnaire survey based on the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) 2018 database, which examined average life satisfaction among older people in Sweden, Austria, and Spain and concluded that there was no sustainable relationship between life satisfaction and age in the three countries, and that it could not be said that life satisfaction necessarily decreases with age (Kutubaeva, 2019). The examination of the relationship between age and health status is particularly important given that the latter is a reliable predictor of morbidity and mortality in the case of many diseases (*e.g.*, cancer, stress, cardiovascular diseases, and other chronic diseases). Therefore, it is no coincidence that this indicator is often used in studies of older people, as it can also be a good indicator of the effectiveness of health interventions (Fábián *et al.*, 2022). It is generally characteristic that health status deteriorates with age, and that health status is on average slightly higher in Northern and Western European countries than in Southern and Central European countries. This is well illustrated by the fact that, according to a study conducted in Hungary in 2021, which examined the health status of the population aged 50 and over, based on the evaluation of 684 responses, the proportion of people aged 50-55 who rated their health as good or very good decreased from 48.1% to 12.8% in the 75+ age group (with those in acceptable health making up the largest group over the age of 56), while according to a questionnaire-based survey conducted by Statistics Sweden based on a sample of nearly 14,000 adults aged 65-84, the average rating is good among those aged 65-79 and still acceptable among those aged 80-84 (Fábián *et al.*, 2022; Györi, 2022; Josefsson *et al.*, 2016). Similar to perceived health, perceived safety also decreases with age (Azevedoa *et al.*, 2021; Migliorini *et al.*, 2008). However, if we also include place of residence, then the two variables together do not necessarily result in the same trend. In this regard, it is worth highlighting a study conducted at the end of 2023 based on data from the European Social Survey in Serbia, which found that while perceived security decreased with age among people living in the Belgrade region, it increased with age among people living in the Vojvodina region (Marković & Filipović, 2025).

In summary, the age pattern of happiness and satisfaction is extremely complex. The previous U-curve model shows a nuanced picture based on international data and significant regional differences can also be observed.

Differences in the place of residence

Turning to the aspect of place of residence, it is worth starting again with indicators of happiness and satisfaction. From the perspective of the classic urban-rural dichotomy, the prevailing view in the literature is that while city dwellers - due to traffic jams, pollution, and social isolation - typically report lower levels of happiness, while those living in villages are generally happier due to closer community ties and proximity to nature, even though these areas typically offer fewer labor market and educational opportunities to their residents (Urbancíková, 2025). However, we must qualify this statement by noting that this picture is primarily true for developed countries, while in developing countries the opposite picture emerges: people living in cities are happier (Sørensen, 2021). In this context, it is worth highlighting a Slovak study. In the former case, based on a sample (1,431 people aged 15 or older) from the 2022 European Social Survey data, researchers conducted personal interviews and found that, surprisingly, people living in villages and large cities were almost equally happy, while those living in suburbs were less happy (presumably because these settlements did not meet the preliminary expectation that they would be able to effectively combine the advantages of urban and rural lifestyles, *e.g.*, long commutes) (Urbancíková, 2025). At the regional level, it appears that traditional Western Europe is happier than Eastern Europe, but the difference is gradually decreasing as the countries in the region slowly overcome the negative aspects of the transition from a socialist planned economy to a market economy (Mladjan & Nikolova, 2025). The situation is similar in terms of satisfaction overall. This is well illustrated by a 2023 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study, which examined 111 countries and concluded that, globally, people living in cities are more satisfied with their lives than those living in villages. However, the difference is only marginal (Tassinari *et al.*, 2023). Interestingly, according to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, there has been no significant difference in life satisfaction between different types of settlements in Hungary in recent years. Generally, county seats/cities with county rights and Budapest alternately proved to be the most satisfied, while the overall level of satisfaction has risen (Elégedettség alakulása régió és településtípus szerint). The pattern observed in terms of satisfaction and happiness also continues in the case of health: as several studies showed, city dwellers generally feel healthier than those living in villages. This is largely due

to the fact that the quality of health services in villages is lower than in cities. This is particularly risky in the case of chronic diseases, which typically require more medical intervention and pose a serious threat to health. It is therefore no coincidence that there is a close link between chronic diseases and poor health. For example, a Chinese study found that 39% of the difference in perceived health can be explained by the prevalence of chronic diseases, supplemented by factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and sleep quality. The disparity between the health of urban and rural residents can also be observed on a global level, regardless of a country's level of development (Wang & Liu, 2025). This pattern is also evident in Hungary: healthier people are traditionally overrepresented among those living in the capital, while the opposite is true among those living in villages. At the same time, it should be added that the proportion of elderly people is higher in villages than in Budapest. This distorts the data to a certain extent (Bernát, 2002). According to domestic and international research on perceived security, people feel safer in villages than in cities (Ruijsbroek *et al.*, 2015; Dusek, 2015). The correlation between settlement size and perceived security is well illustrated by the 2014 Nebraska Rural Poll, which surveyed nearly 2,000 people and found that 22% of residents in settlements with a population of 10,000 or more were concerned about crime, compared to only 10% of those living in settlements with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (Vogt *et al.*, 2014). A similar correlation was also found in a study conducted at the end of 2023 based on data from the European Social Survey in Serbia, which concluded that people living in villages in the Vojvodina region felt five times safer than those living in large cities (Marković & Filipović, 2025). One of the reasons for this may be that people living in villages assess the severity of problems such as burglaries, robberies, national and ethnic conflicts, or violent crimes against life as lower in their place of residence than city dwellers (Dusek, 2015). This is because cities can be fertile ground for crime and violence due to their high population density, wealth, and social inequalities (Azevedo *et al.*, 2021). In Hungary, perceived security has been gradually increasing in recent years (from 74% to 82% between 2015 and 2024), with Western Transdanubia being the safest region in the country and Northern Hungary being the least safe. This trend should be assessed in light of the fact that, at the same time, the wave of migration and the terrorist attacks committed in Western countries significantly affected European citizens' perceived security (Kaiser, 2018; KSH, 2024; KSH, n.d.).

In summary, urban-rural differences are significant in several indicators. Urban residents often feel healthier, while rural residents feel safer in their living environment.

Marital status and having children

Nowadays, it is particularly important to examine how factors such as marital status or having children/number of children correlate with indicators of well-being. In this regard, it is advisable to first examine the area of satisfaction and happiness. Numerous studies in the literature examined the actual impact of childbirth on parents' levels of satisfaction/happiness. There is debate among researchers as to whether the birth of the first/first two children, or even having children at all, can have a positive effect on parents' levels of satisfaction/happiness. Many assume that while the birth of every planned child increases happiness, the arrival of unplanned children reduces it. However, an unexpected child can generally have a negative impact on satisfaction/happiness levels. Other studies show that while satisfaction/happiness decreases after pregnancy, there is a positive correlation between satisfaction/happiness and the intention to have more children. However, there is a consensus that, regardless of the increase or decrease following the birth of a child (or children), after a few years, parents' happiness levels return to the level they were at before the birth of their child (or children) (Pertold & Gebicka-Spolcova, 2020; Luppi & Mencarini, 2018; Hudde & Jacob, 2025). It is worth noting here that in 2018, Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families also conducted research on this topic, based on a survey of families visiting the BabaMama Expo and participants at the Charity Advent Fair held at Millenáris (a total of 2,833 people) - where those affected were asked about having children and becoming parents. The survey indicates that, overall, families with children are happier than those without children, but that happiness does not increase with the number of children, but rather decreases (those with one child are the happiest). In addition, nearly 70% of respondents agreed that having children greatly improves perceived happiness (this was most strongly agreed with by those with one child) (Balogh *et al.*, 2019). Numerous studies also examined the extent to which marital status influences satisfaction/happiness. It is generally believed that single people, for example, are less satisfied with their lives than those in long-term relationships or marriages. However, in the case of singles who have never married, this difference is much smaller (Rövid, 2020; Zimmermann & Hameister, 2019; Agócs & Balogh, 2020). Nevertheless, as shown by the 2021 Hungarostudy data, a study conducted on a sample of 2,000 young adults (aged 18-40) also pointed out that young people in relationships are generally happier and more satisfied with their lives than those who are not in a relationship. Moreover, the type of relationship also influences satisfaction/happiness: those who are married are more satisfied and happier than those who are in a cohabiting relationship (Balog & Susánszky, 2022). Interestingly, however, divorce reduces life satisfaction

to a greater extent than widowhood (Czibere, 2017). In terms of health and security, we see fundamentally similar patterns emerging, *i.e.*, those in relationships and those with a high willingness to have children report high values (Pérez & Beaudet, 1999; Fedor, 2019; Pári *et al.*, 2022). When it comes to specifics, we can cite numerous domestic and international studies as examples. In relation to health, it is important to mention the study entitled Quality of life in the city of Nyíregyháza - Household Panel, (Takács *et al.*, 2019), which has been running since 2008. In its 2018 survey, contrary to the consensus in the literature, it found that single people reported better health than those in relationships. They explained this result by suggesting that it was likely that single people were the youngest in the sample (Fedor, 2019). Also noteworthy is the research conducted in the 1994/1995 and 1996/1997 cycles of the Canadian National Population Health Survey (NPHS). Based on NPHS data, it worked with a sample of 1,805 women from 10 Canadian provinces who had at least one child under the age of 18 living at home. The results show that single mothers generally report poorer health than those living in two-parent families (Pérez & Beaudet, 1999). In terms of perceived security, we would first like to highlight a Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families study, which aimed to assess attitudes related to the rejection of having children and was conducted between April 30 and May 15, 2021, in the form of an online questionnaire, using the snowball method, with 3,800 participants aged 15-49. The researchers concluded that if the arrival of a child jeopardizes perceived security, more than 60% of respondents tend to consciously reject having children. A high proportion of respondents were willing to have children if they believed that having children would positively affect their perceived security (Pári *et al.*, 2022). A Polish study involving 240 women aged 24-35 with secondary or higher education, divided into three groups—single, cohabiting, and married—examined the relationship between perceived security and marital status. The study showed that, thanks to their stable and legalized relationships, married women have a greater extent of perceived security than those who are cohabiting or single (Janicka, 2015).

Overall, people in relationships and those with children tend to be happier, but having more children does not automatically increase happiness. Perceived security plays a key role in decisions about having children.

Political preferences

Finally, it is worth looking at the correlations between well-being indicators and political preferences. Our investigation is justified by the fact that, in the field of well-being research, studies of different political preferences are becoming increasingly important, with the

results being used by politicians to shape public discourse. If we turn to one of the most popular sub-areas, satisfaction and happiness, two main trends emerge: the relationship between support for the ruling party and happiness, and the difference in happiness levels between voters belonging to different political sides. With regard to the former, we would like to highlight a Hungarian study that examined the European Social Survey database covering 30 European countries between 2002 and 2015. The research was based on the assumption that people continue to judge political events primarily on the basis of their party affiliation and are much more accepting of mistakes made by their own political side than those made by the opposition. Based on this, the researchers concluded that voters for the ruling party are happier than those who vote for opposition parties, and that this has an impact on the entire election cycle. Moreover, the closer voters feel to their parties, the more pronounced this difference is (Patkós & Farkas, 2020). However, it is also important to ask whether there is a demonstrable difference in the level of happiness among voters belonging to different political sides in general. Numerous studies have been conducted in this area, examining various aspects. The general conclusion is that conservative voters are generally happier than their left-wing liberal counterparts. A Belgian study, which used individual-level data to examine psychological well-being and right-wing attitude variables in a sample of 94,000 people collected worldwide (nearly 140,000 people), while using country-level threat as a contextual variable, highlighted that, especially in countries with high levels of threat, people with right-wing attitudes were happier than their left-wing counterparts. According to the researchers, right-wing attitudes serve as a self-defense mechanism for those concerned, helping them to protect themselves from threats (Onraet *et al.*, 2016). Another study concluded that growing economic inequalities will widen the gap between the happiness levels of conservatives and liberals (in favor of conservatives), as the former are protected from the negative effects of economic inequality by their ideological buffer (Napier & Jost, 2008). A similar picture emerges with regard to health: conservative voters are more likely to report better health than their liberal counterparts. This is well illustrated by the fact that in the US, Republican voters reported poor health 25% less often than Democratic voters (Subramanian & Perkins, 2010). In this regard, a study covering 29 European countries based on data from the European Social Survey for 2002, 2004, and 2006 — which allowed for a micro-level examination of health status and political ideology — also confirmed this correlation: both age/gender-adjusted and country-specific models showed that right-wing voters tend to be healthier than left-wing/liberal voters (Subramanian *et al.*, 2009). Interestingly, however, those with poorer

subjective health are less likely to vote, and when they do, they tend to vote for anti-establishment parties (Menon *et al.*, 2025). When it comes to feelings of security, researchers often examine whether there is a correlation between various (external and internal) threats and political attitudes. In this area, many consider it evident that there is a positive correlation between threats and right-wing political attitudes, and that those with right-wing attitudes are much more sensitive to threats. Based on this, they assume a dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between the two (Onraet *et al.*, 2014). However, a study covering 56 countries, based on data from the World Values Survey, examining the relationships between six different threats (*e.g.*, economic, violence) and a number of political ideologies (*e.g.*, cultural, economic), has revealed that this issue is more complex than previously thought: although there is indeed a link between political ideology and threat, it depends on the type of threat/ideology and the country itself. For this reason, the relationship between right-wing political attitudes and threats cannot be treated as evidence, since, for example, economic threats are more likely to be associated with left-wing economic ideology, while right-wing political attitudes are more likely to be linked to threats based on violence (Brandt *et al.*, 2021). Further research also considers this more nuanced approach to be justified, pointing out, among other things, that external threats are typically associated with right-wing political attitudes, while internal threats are more likely to be associated with left-wing political attitudes (Kteily & Brandt, 2025). Thus, it is primarily the specific threat that determines the political attitude associated with it: for example, threats related to health care, environmental pollution, or corporate abuse are primarily associated with and reinforce liberal political attitudes (Eadeh & Chang, 2020). When examining political preferences, it is worth mentioning the studies that analyze individuals' subjective assessments of their own situation and that of their country. In general, people tend to view their own situation as better than that of their country, regardless of whether the survey is conducted by pro-government or opposition think tanks/pollsters. The main reason for this is that people are better able to judge their own situation, as it is based on their everyday personal experiences. In contrast, when assessing the situation of the country, people do not reflect on reality, but on the situation as presented through various channels of public communication and, in most cases, interpreted simultaneously. Another factor that may play a role in this discrepancy is that people generally feel that they have more control over their own lives and greater influence on them than they do on the fate of the country (Roser & Ritchie, 2018; Bernát & Gábos, 2002). Research of this kind is becoming increasingly important in the context of well-being research, as both the ruling and opposition parties

have an interest in having up-to-date information on voters' subjective assessments of their own situation and that of the country. It is no coincidence that most pollsters/think tanks now measure these indicators, if not regularly, then at least in connection with some political event, such as approaching elections, the end of the political year, political scandals, *etc.* Given that the phenomenon of economic voting can also be observed in Hungary, these can be good long-term indicators, especially if the research also covers various sociodemographic characteristics (*e.g.*, gender, age, place of residence, educational attainment) - for future political processes, including the expected outcome of elections (Rajnai, 2022).

It can therefore be concluded that there is a close correlation between well-being indicators and political attitudes. Pro-government voters tend to be more satisfied, but differences in well-being between political sides are also linked to current social threats.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

The present review is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, language-related constraints may have affected both the scope of the literature included and its interpretation. Although the review integrates both Hungarian and international sources, the inclusion of the specific Hungarian-language studies inevitably introduces a degree of selectivity and potential bias. Empirical results available exclusively in Hungarian remain less accessible to the international scholarly community, while the translation of conceptually dense terms—such as well-being, subjective well-being, and quality of life—may entail shifts in meaning. At the same time, the predominance of English-language publications in the international literature may lead to an overrepresentation of Anglo-Saxon conceptual frameworks. At the same time, the Hungarian-specific focus of the review should not be regarded solely as a limitation, but also as a potential contribution. By incorporating evidence from a relatively underrepresented national context, the study provides novel empirical and conceptual insights that extend the existing well-being literature beyond its predominantly Anglo-Saxon focus. In this sense, the Hungarian case offers a valuable complementary perspective, enriching the diversity of approaches and highlighting the importance of context-sensitive interpretations in well-being research.

Secondly, the analysis reflects context-specific characteristics of Hungary, which limit the external validity and generalizability of the conclusions. A substantial proportion of the cited studies are embedded in Hungary's specific socio-institutional and political

context, including its family policy regime, welfare system, and public discourse. Consequently, the observed associations between well-being and factors such as political preferences, family status, or material conditions may not be directly transferable to other national settings without accounting for structural and cultural differences.

Thirdly, the review does not employ a formal meta-analytic approach. While it offers a structured narrative synthesis of the literature, it does not quantitatively aggregate findings (*e.g.*, through effect size estimation) or systematically assess heterogeneity across studies. As a result, it is not possible to derive precise estimates regarding the strength of associations between well-being and its determinants, nor to rigorously address issues such as publication bias or methodological comparability.

Finally, the review is influenced by the characteristics of the Hungarian grey literature. A considerable part of the domestic evidence base consists of institutional reports, policy analyses, and survey-based publications that are not always subject to peer review. Although these sources often provide timely and contextually rich insights—particularly in periods of rapid social change, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russo-Ukrainian war—their methodological transparency, replicability, and overall scientific rigor may vary. The inclusion of such materials therefore introduces an additional part of uncertainty regarding the findings.

Taken together, these limitations indicate that the results should be interpreted as a context-sensitive, exploratory synthesis rather than a definitive or universally generalizable review. Future research would benefit from systematic cross-national comparisons, the development of standardized measurement frameworks, and the application of meta-analytic techniques to strengthen the empirical foundations of well-being research.

CONCLUSIONS

The review of well-being research demonstrates that well-being is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon shaped simultaneously by individual characteristics, social conditions, economic circumstances, and large-scale societal crises. Despite the conceptual diversity present in the literature, the reviewed studies consistently indicate that well-being indicators — including happiness, life satisfaction, perceived health, perceived security, and subjective assessments of personal and national conditions — provide important insights into broader social processes and societal resilience.

The reviewed literature also shows that well-being indicators are highly sensitive to periods of crisis. As discussed in Sections 3.1-3.4, both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war were associated with declines in happiness, life satisfaction, perceived health, and perceived security, while anxiety and psychological vulnerability increased across several social groups. These negative effects appeared particularly strongly among women, young people, the elderly, urban residents, and financially vulnerable individuals. Because psychological strain emerged as a recurring finding across multiple studies, the reviewed literature suggests the importance of strengthening mental health support systems and improving access to psychological services, especially for vulnerable populations.

One of the most consistent findings of the reviewed studies concerns the role of financial circumstances (Section 3.5). Both Hungarian and international research demonstrated that financial insecurity is closely associated with lower levels of happiness and satisfaction, poorer subjective health, and weaker perceived security. Since financial status repeatedly appeared as one of the strongest determinants of well-being, the findings underline the potential importance of policies that support economic stability, predictable income conditions, and the reduction of poverty-related risks.

The analysis of age-related patterns (Section 3.6) demonstrated that the traditional U-shaped interpretation of happiness and life satisfaction is increasingly insufficient to explain contemporary well-being trends. Several studies emphasized considerable differences across countries, genders, and cohorts. Consequently, future research may benefit from more differentiated analytical approaches that simultaneously consider demographic, regional, and generational factors.

The reviewed studies also revealed substantial territorial differences in well-being indicators (Section 3.7). Urban residents often reported better perceived health due to greater access to healthcare services, whereas rural residents generally expressed stronger perceived security and social cohesion. These findings indicate that regional inequalities remain an important aspect of well-being research and suggest the importance of reducing disparities in healthcare accessibility and community support systems across different types of settlements.

The literature reviewed in Section 3.8 further highlights the complex relationship between family status, parenthood, and well-being. Although individuals living in stable relationships and families with children generally reported higher levels of happiness and satisfaction, the positive association did not necessarily increase with the number of children. At the same time, studies examining the pandemic period emphasized the

importance of work-family balance and flexible working arrangements. Based on these findings, the literature suggests that family-related policy approaches may be more effective when they focus not only on fertility outcomes but also on improving the everyday quality of family life and reducing burdens associated with parenting.

The review also confirmed that political attitudes are associated with subjective well-being indicators (Section 3.9). Studies examining political preferences repeatedly found differences in happiness, satisfaction, perceived health, and perceived security between supporters of different political orientations. At the same time, the reviewed literature suggests that these relationships are strongly influenced by perceived social threats, political narratives, and media environments. Therefore, future well-being research should continue to examine the interaction between political attitudes, social perception, and subjective well-being.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates the importance of applying a multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach to well-being research. Since conceptual fragmentation remains characteristic of the field, the development of a more coordinated national well-being measurement framework in Hungary could contribute to the long-term monitoring of social and emotional trends and provide a more consistent empirical basis for future academic and policy-related analyses.

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Author contributions

Tamás Zoltán Wágner: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing—original draft preparation. Miklós Horváth: Data curation, Writing—original draft preparation. Tünde Fűrész: Supervision, Writing—review & editing. András Pári: Supervision, Methodology, Writing—review & editing, Validation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. The article was subject to the journal's standard procedures, with peer review handled independently of the editor and the affiliated research groups.

Use of large language models, AI and machine learning tools

This work did not use any artificial intelligence tools.

Data availability statement

No additional data and not applicable.

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