

*Economics and Research*

# Happiness in Alberta:

The results of ATB Financial's Alberta Happiness Survey

June 2015

## Economics and Research

Led by ATB's Chief Economist Todd Hirsch, the Economics and Research Team provides value to Albertans by increasing understanding of the forces and issues affecting Alberta's long-term prosperity.

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- a hub of new ideas and a catalyst for robust debate about Alberta's prosperity and the forces that shape it

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- stay on top of the local, regional, national and global issues that affect Alberta's economy
- inspire and inform debate about how to improve Alberta's long-term prosperity and quality of life



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## The top ten things you need to know about happiness in Alberta

1. **Most Albertans are happy** – Alberta is a happy place, with eight in ten Albertans saying they are happy.
2. **Most Albertans are satisfied with their lives** – When happiness is measured in terms of life satisfaction, about two-thirds of Albertans give themselves a seven or higher out of ten. This puts us in the middle of the pack among other jurisdictions and suggests there is room for improvement.
3. **Health, relationships and time top the list of things Albertans say are important to their happiness** – Over eight in ten Albertans say feeling healthy, supportive relationships with family and friends and time to do the things they enjoy are very important to their happiness.
4. **There is very little difference between Calgary and Edmonton** – When it comes to happiness levels and the things that make Albertans happy, there is not a lot of difference between the province's two big cities.
5. **Alberta and happiness go hand in hand** – Most (79 per cent) Albertans feel the province is a great place in which to find happiness.
6. **Albertans are pretty positive** – At least six in ten Albertans reported experiencing a substantial amount of positive emotions the day before the survey. In terms of negative emotions, about 38 per cent of Albertans reported feeling lots of stress and worry and 55 per cent felt quite tired the day before the survey.
7. **Money matters** – The relationship between money and happiness is complex, but most Albertans (82 per cent) say more money to do the things they enjoy would make them happier. While not everyone who has more money is happier than those with less, average happiness and life satisfaction levels rise with household income. The percentage of Albertans who say they are happy jumps from 68 per cent among Albertans with household incomes below \$30,000 to 88 per cent among those with incomes of \$150,000 or more. The percentage of Albertans who report a high level of life satisfaction rises from 41 per cent for those with household incomes of less than \$30,000 to 78 per cent for households making over \$150,000.
8. **Happiness is contagious** – The survey results remind us that, notwithstanding the effects of mental illness, grief, physical pain, addiction, abuse and poverty, happiness is in many ways a state of mind over which we can exercise a fair degree of control. We can smile when we meet people on the street, we can spend time with those who are lonely, we can support one another and in a multitude of other ways *proactively* make happiness happen. One of the many great things about happiness is that it's contagious.
9. **They could be happier** – Alberta's overall happiness level (81 per cent) is lower than in the United States (87 per cent) and many European countries. Eleven countries in Europe have happiness levels of 90 per cent or higher. We don't know why this is the case, but it suggests that we can do better here in Alberta.
10. **The oil slump is not helping** – Alberta's overall happiness level would be at least a little higher if the survey wasn't conducted during an economic downturn. Over a third of Albertans say that the bad economic news was making them less happy.

## Are you happy?

*“It’s so hard to forget pain, but it’s even harder to remember sweetness. We have no scar to show for happiness.” — Chuck Palahniuk*

“Are you happy?” is a simple enough question to ask, but often difficult to answer because lots of things can affect our happiness. Some of these things are within our control while others are imposed upon us by genetics, bad luck or economic forces. The question also makes us wonder what we mean by happiness and if the happiness we are currently chasing is the “true” happiness the gurus tell us we *should* be seeking. Will I be happy if I get that new sports car or am I kidding myself? Would I be happier if I took more time to appreciate the small things in life? There are, of course, no right answers; happiness is an inherently subjective experience.

Despite this, the question is worth asking because our answers tell us a great deal. If we are unhappy, we know something is wrong and hopefully we can change things for the better. If we are happy, it makes sense to pay attention to why this is the case so we can maintain it.

This is why ATB Financial’s Economics and Research Team asked Albertans about their happiness. Whether you define happiness as feeling good at the moment or as a deep sense of satisfaction with your life, ATB is always looking for ways to make Alberta an even happier place.

Using questions drawn from international surveys and some new ones designed to tease out what makes people happy, we conducted a web-based public opinion poll with a representative sample of 999 respondents from across the province between February 5 and 23, 2015. The poll was conducted by Vision Critical using a web panel method. Although the sample is representative of the Alberta population, it’s not a random probability sample so it’s inappropriate to cite a margin of error or confidence interval.

This report presents the main results of the survey. We hope that it will spark conversations about Alberta’s quality of life and how to improve it. For a more concise account of the results, see the inaugural edition of [Perch](#).

## Defining happiness

Before we dive into the results, it’s important to note that happiness is a bit of a slippery term. When you see headlines about the happiest country in the world or that money doesn’t buy happiness, it’s essential to know what *type* of happiness is being discussed. Some surveys define happiness in terms of *life satisfaction* while others use it to mean *emotional well-being*. The wording of the questions used to measure happiness also vary from survey to survey.

For example, the recent headlines saying that Saguenay is the happiness city in Canada and Vancouver is the least happy, refer to *life satisfaction* levels as measured by [Statistics Canada](#) using a variation of a question found in a number of international surveys. It turns out that life satisfaction is high in Saguenay, but this may or may not mean that you will see lots of smiling and laughing people walking down the street because that is a different kind of happiness.

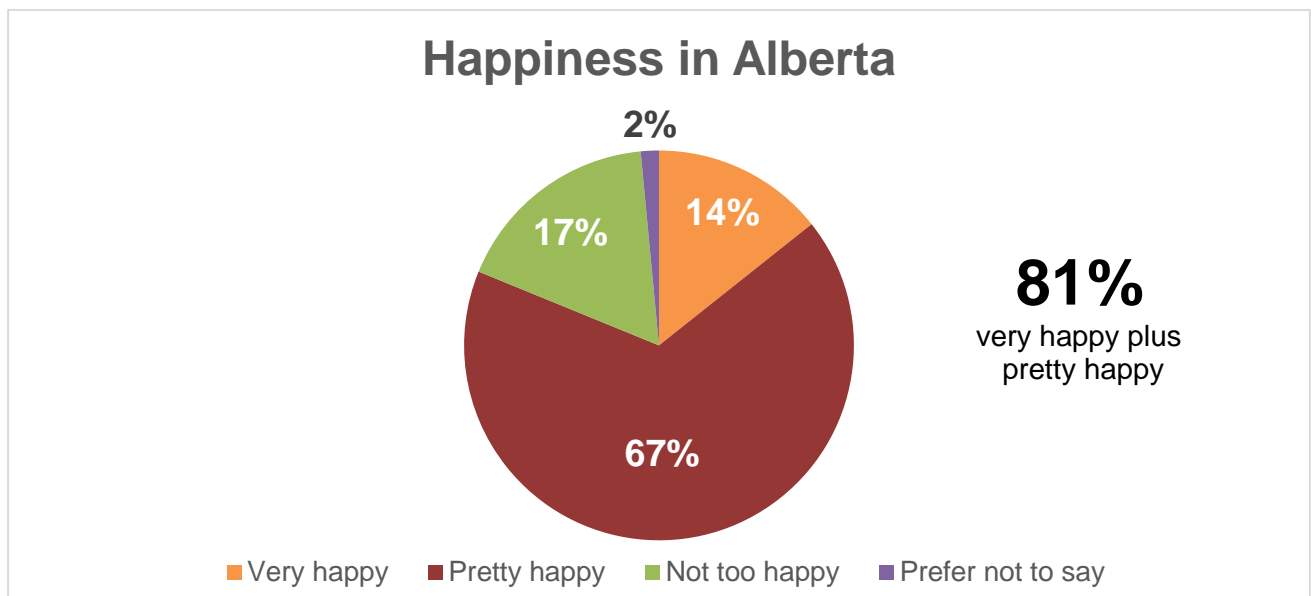
### Types of happiness measured in surveys

Type	Typical survey question
General	Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy or not too happy?
Life satisfaction	Imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time? (This is called the Cantril ladder.)  Statistics Canada uses this wording: Using a scale of zero to ten, where zero means "very dissatisfied" and ten means "very satisfied," how do you feel about your life as a whole right now?
Emotional well-being	This is usually an index that combines answers to several questions such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you feel well-rested yesterday?</li> <li>• Were you treated with respect all day yesterday?</li> <li>• Did you smile and laugh a lot yesterday?</li> <li>• Did you learn or do something interesting yesterday?</li> <li>• Did you experience enjoyment during a lot of the day yesterday?</li> <li>• Did you experience stress during a lot of the day yesterday?</li> </ul>

The *Alberta Happiness Survey* explored all three types of happiness.

### Are Albertans happy?

About eight in ten Albertans (81 per cent) say they are either “very happy” or “pretty happy.” In this case, we left it up to survey respondents to define what happiness means.



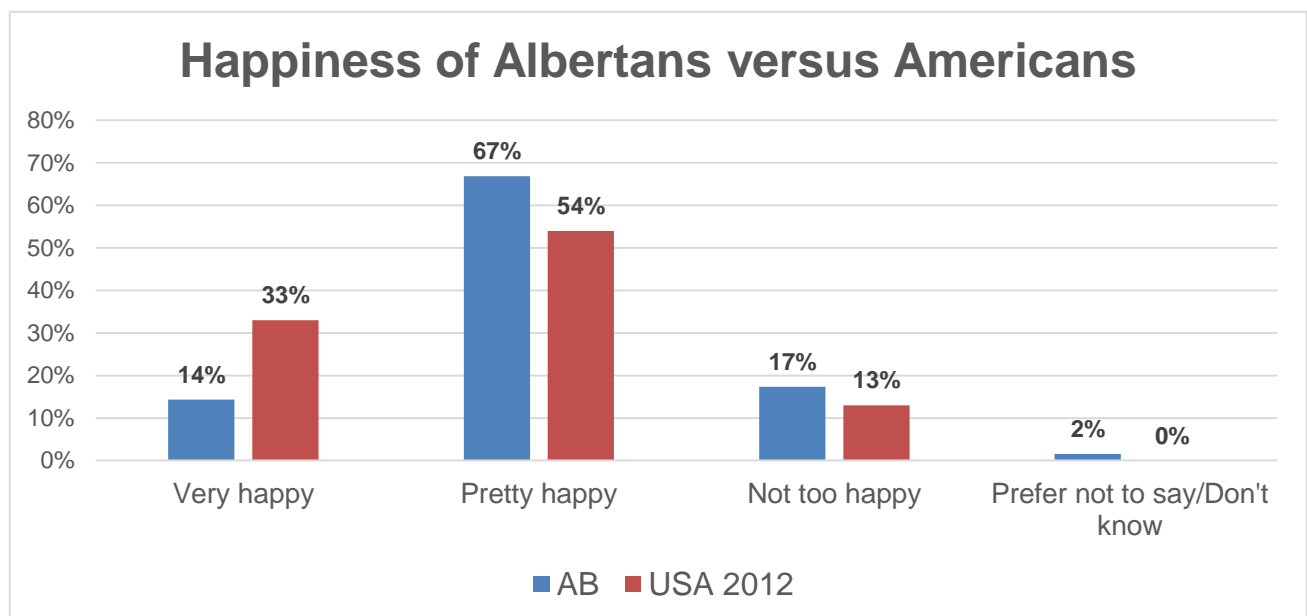
Question: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy or not too happy? Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

This tells us that Alberta is a generally happy place. Most Albertans (81 per cent) are able to say, all things considered, “I’m happy.” This a good sign. Still, there is room for improvement with almost one in five of Albertans (17 per cent) in the “not too happy” category. Not surprisingly, only 48 per cent of people who are unemployed and looking for work say they are happy.

Not everyone is going to be happy all the time. We know from experience that people cycle in and out of happy and unhappy periods in their lives and that some people can find a way to smile in the face of terrible adversity while others never seem happy no matter how good they have it. A death of a loved one, losing your job and getting hurt in a car accident are examples of things that might make someone answer “not too happy.” Notwithstanding depression, anxiety and other involuntary mental conditions that can have long-term effects, unhappiness is often a temporary state in that people heal and find happiness again. For example, 50 per cent of the respondents to the *Alberta Happiness Survey* who said they were unhappy also said they expected things to improve over the coming year. At the other end of the spectrum, falling in love, being able to take a dream vacation and becoming a grandparent are things that might make someone suddenly say “I’m happy.”

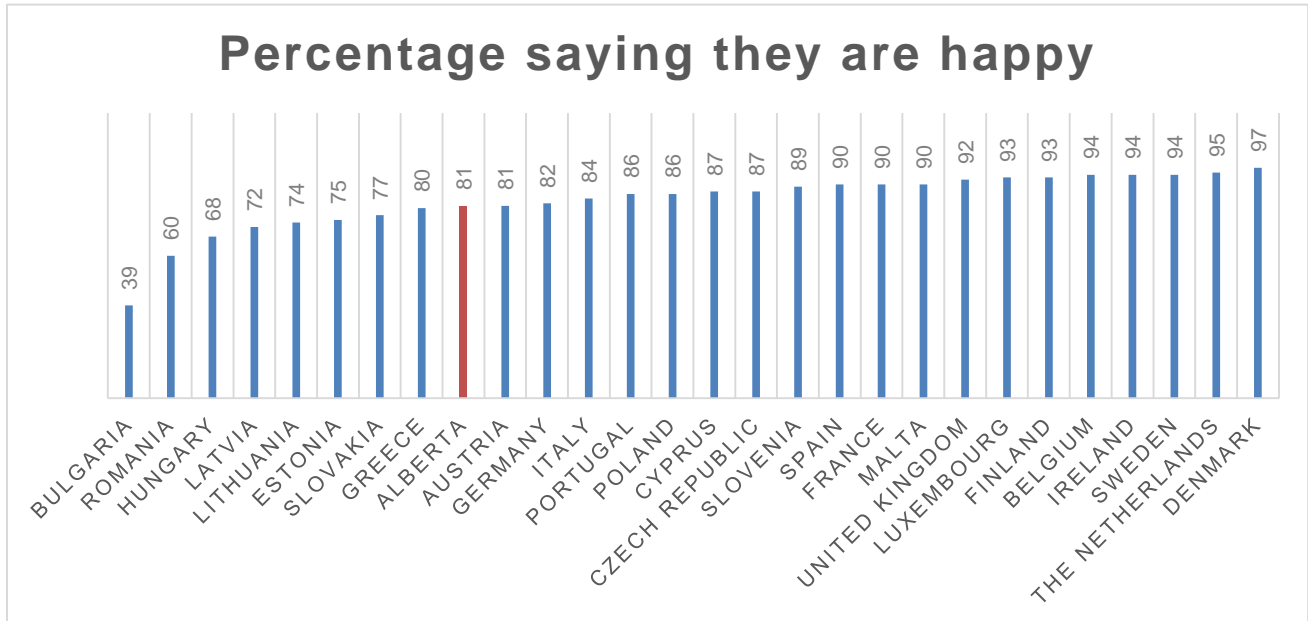
While we don’t have national results for this question, we can compare Alberta to the United States. When we do, we find that our southern neighbours are a little more likely to say they are happy (87 per cent of Americans put themselves in the happy category in 2012 compared to 81 per cent of Albertans in 2015). The U.S. number is pretty consistent over good and bad economic years. Since the 1980s, the lowest it has dipped to is 86 per cent in 2010.

What’s also interesting is that more Americans put themselves in the “very happy” category than Albertans – 33 per cent in the U.S. compared to 14 per cent in Alberta. Are more Americans feeling especially happy than Albertans? Or are Albertans just more modest and, in turn, less likely to say they are “very happy?” We don’t know. Either way, the survey findings suggest that we have some catching up to do in terms of how happy we feel in Alberta.



Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015* and [US General Social Survey 2012](#)

The average percentage of people saying they are happy in the European Union was 87 per cent (as of 2006). Alberta is doing much better than Bulgaria, where only 38 per cent put themselves in the happy category, but we are way behind Denmark, where a whopping 97 per cent of the population reported being happy ([Eurobarometer](#)).



Question: Taking all things together would you say you are very happy, quite happy, not very happy or not at all happy?  
 Source: Special Eurobarometer 273 / Wave 66.3, Fieldwork November and December 2006 and *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

### Oil prices and happiness

The *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey* was conducted in February 2015 when slumping oil prices were hanging over the province. To gauge how this might be affecting the results, we asked respondents if the bad news was reducing their happiness and 36 per cent said it was. Interestingly, the percentage of Albertans who said the economic bad news was reducing their happiness *rises* with household income. Thirty per cent of respondents with household incomes below \$30,000 said the bad news was getting them down compared to 44 per cent of those with incomes over \$150,000.

We don't know how many respondents would have answered the "Are you happy?" question differently if the survey had taken place during better economic conditions. Nonetheless, it's a safe bet that at least some of them would have answered "very happy" or "pretty happy" rather than "not too happy." If *everyone* in the "not too happy" group who also said the economy was getting them down changed their response, the overall proportion of happy Albertans would jump from 81 per cent to 88 per cent. Given that the state of the economy is only one factor affecting happiness, it's unlikely that the boost would be quite that great, but conducting the survey when the economy is booming would almost certainly push the result higher than 81 per cent. Better economic conditions might see the proportion of Albertans putting themselves in the "very happy" category rise as well.

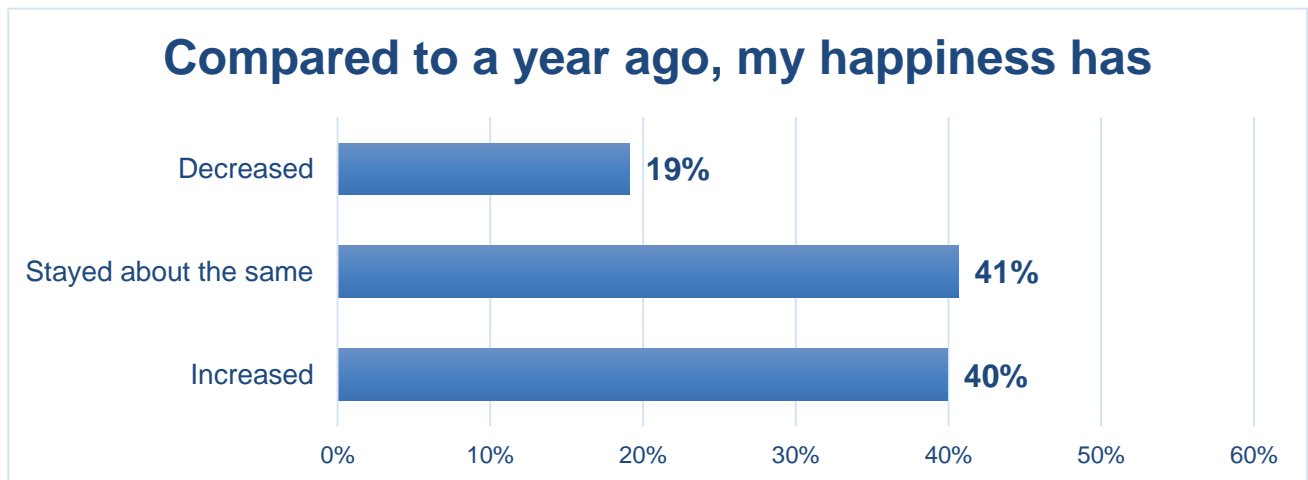
It's also important to be mindful of the effects of the state of the economy on the life satisfaction and emotional well-being results discussed below.



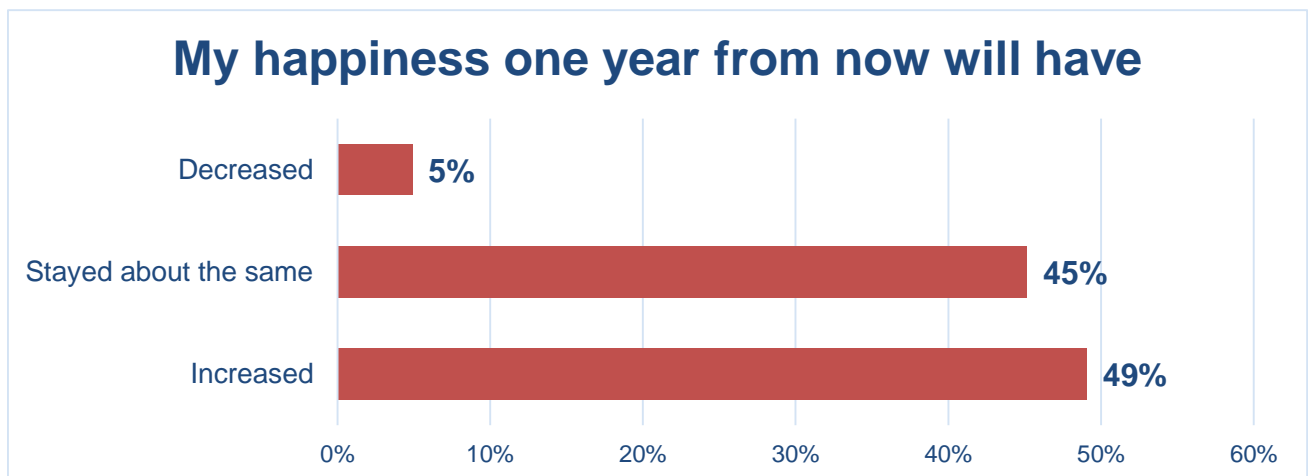
## Future happiness

We know that a person can be happy at some points in their life and unhappy in others. It's not surprising, therefore, that when we asked Albertans how their overall level of happiness has changed since last year, we find that it fluctuated either up (40 per cent) or down (19 per cent) for 59 per cent of respondents. The other four in ten said their happiness level was about the same as it was a year ago.

Looking ahead a year, almost half of us (49 per cent) expect our happiness to increase while only five per cent fear that it will decrease.



Question: Compared to about a year ago, has your overall level of happiness increased a great deal, increased somewhat, stayed about the same, decreased somewhat or decreased a great deal? Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

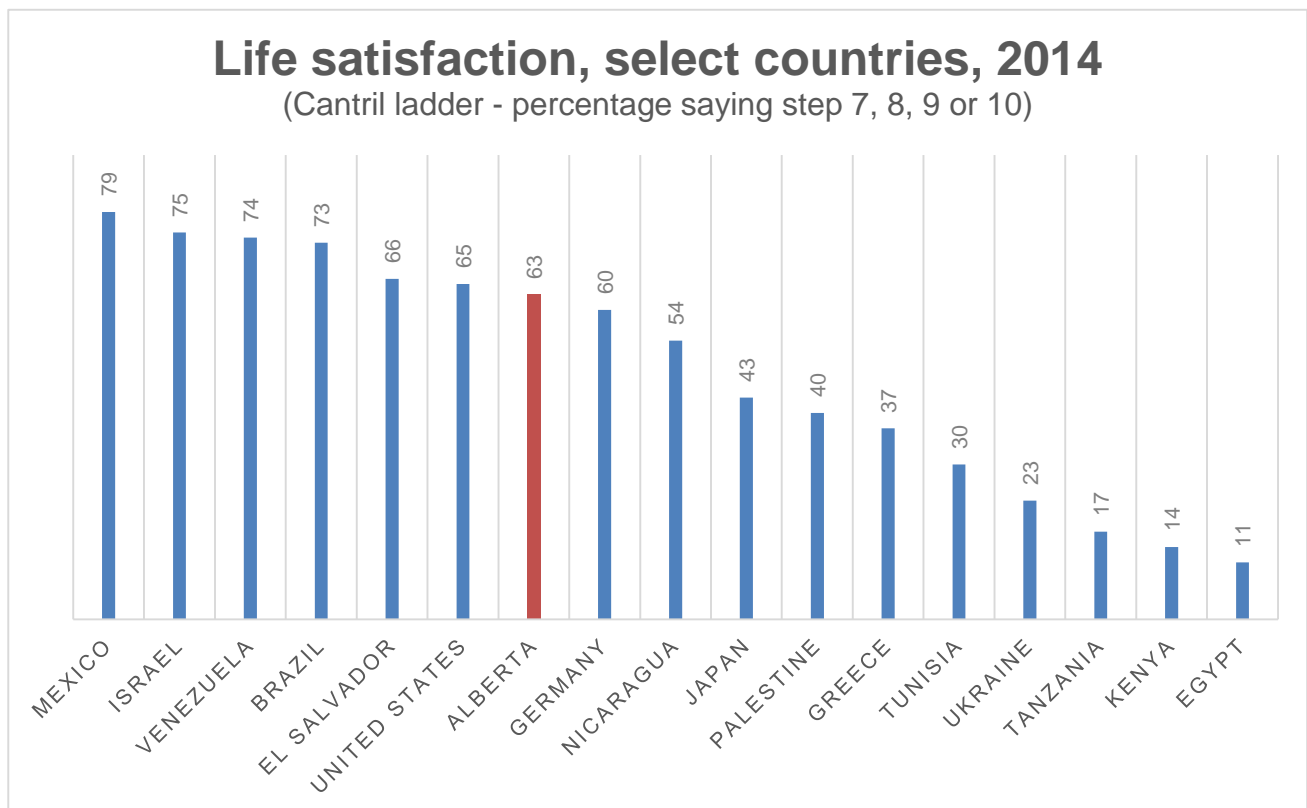


Question: By about this time next year, do you think your overall level of happiness is likely to have increased a great deal, increased somewhat, stayed about the same, decreased somewhat or decreased a great deal? Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

## Life satisfaction

There is a school of thought that believes the best way to assess happiness (a.k.a. subjective well-being) is to measure how satisfied people are with their lives. For the *Alberta Happiness Survey*, we used a measure of life satisfaction called the Cantril ladder (named after its inventor Dr. Hadley Cantril). Ladder questions ask respondents to imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for the respondent and the bottom the worst. Respondents are then asked to say which step of the ladder they feel they stand on at the present time.

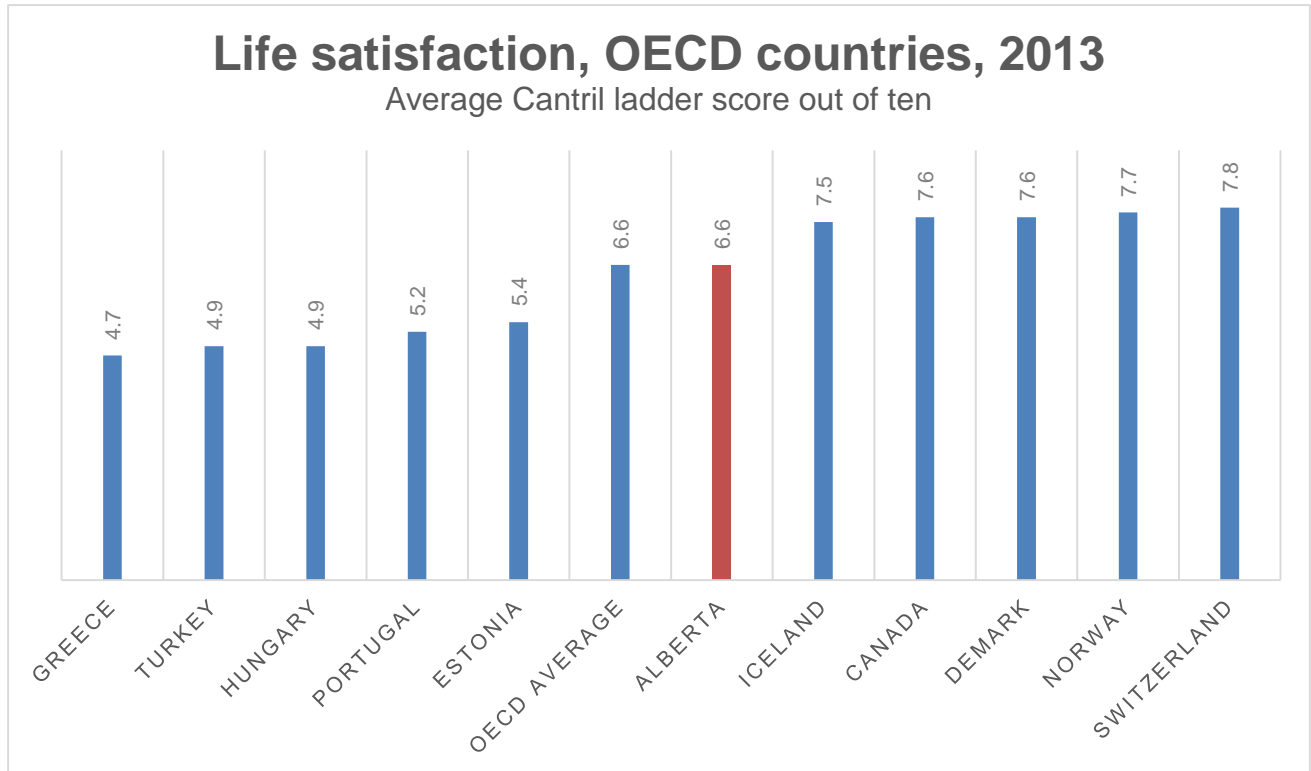
About 63 per cent of Albertans put themselves on rung seven or higher, which is a pretty good indication that they are relatively satisfied with how their lives are going. As with general happiness, being out of work is a good predictor of a low level of life satisfaction – only 32 per cent of unemployed respondents but themselves on rung seven or higher.



Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015* and [Spring 2014 Global Attitudes Survey, PEW Research Center](#) (See Appendix 1 for the full list of countries in the PEW survey)

Alberta's 63 per cent puts it in roughly the same camp as the Americans and Germans, well ahead of the Egyptians and Kenyans, but a long way back from the Mexicans and Israelis.

To compare Alberta to Canada and other OECD countries, we take the average Cantril score for Alberta, which is 6.6 out of ten. When we do this, we find that Alberta's life satisfaction level is on par with the OECD average, but a full point below the Canadian average of 7.6.

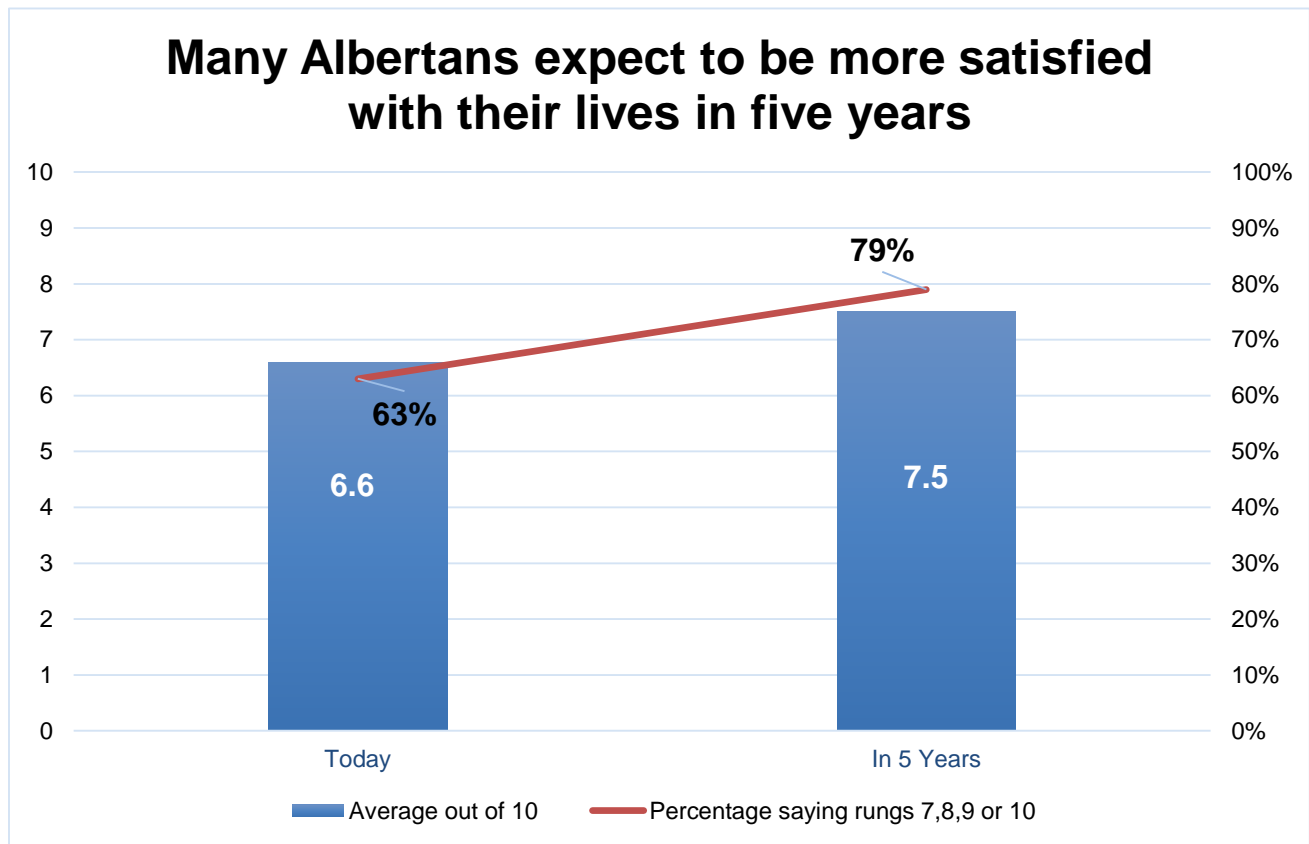


Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015* and [OECD Better Life Index](#)

Looking at the extremes, about ten per cent of Albertans put themselves on the top two rungs of the Cantril ladder (rungs nine and ten) while only one per cent put themselves on the bottom two (rungs zero and one). With that said, over 20 per cent of Albertans put themselves on rung four or lower – that’s one in five of us who think our lives are going rather poorly. As with general happiness, there is room to do better and a need to remember that a large number of Albertans are unsatisfied with their lives.

## Life satisfaction in five years

As with general happiness, a person's life satisfaction level is likely to change over time. In this regard, Albertans tend toward optimism as more of us anticipate that in five years we will be higher up Cantril's ladder. The percentage of Albertans expecting to be on rung seven or higher rises to 79 per cent, taking our mean score with it from 6.6 to 7.5. Of course, only time will tell if this optimism is warranted and if actual life satisfaction levels increase.



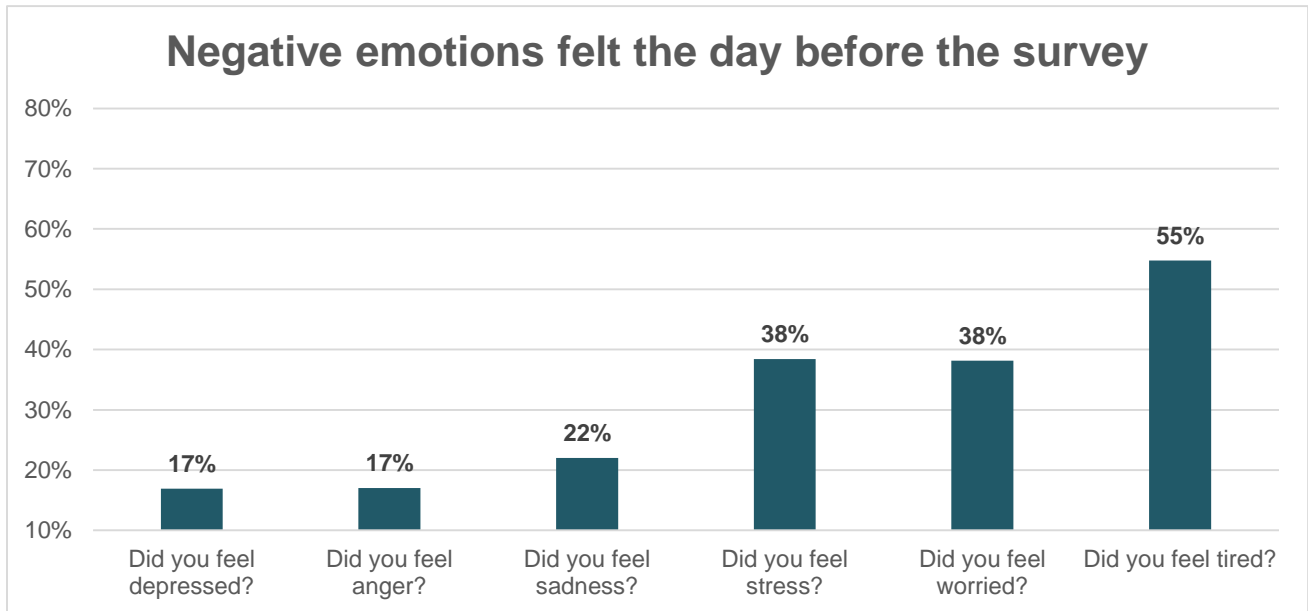
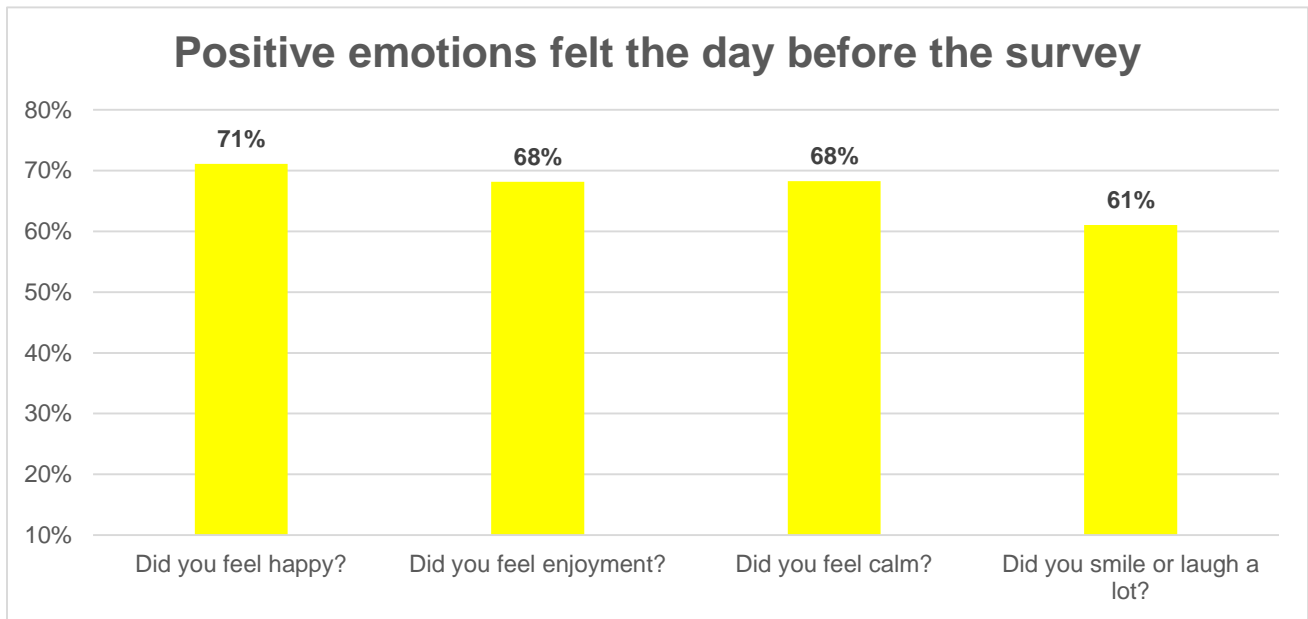
Question: Imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now? Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

## Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being is another way to measure happiness. Headlines about Latin American countries like Paraguay being the happiest in the world are based on a series of questions about how people say they felt the day before the survey. Typical questions include: Did you feel calm? Did you feel well-rested? Did you smile and laugh a lot? Did you feel respected?

[Gallup](#) used to do an international ranking of emotional well-being using its [Positive Experience Index](#). (In 2014, Gallup switched to a broader measure called the *Well-Being Index*.) It was Gallup's *Positive Experience Index* that ranked Paraguay, Panama, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Ecuador as the five happiest countries in the world in 2013. Is Alberta more or less happy than countries in Latin

America when it comes to emotional well-being? Differences in survey techniques and shifting definitions of emotional well-being mean that we can't use the *Alberta Happiness Survey* results to insert Alberta into these rankings. However, we can still gain a lot insight about the emotional health of Albertans by looking at the province in isolation. According to the *Alberta Happiness Survey*, the majority of Albertans feel a lot of positive emotions. About 61 per cent said they smiled and laughed a lot the day before the survey and 71 per cent reported feeling a six or higher out of ten when asked if they felt happy the day before the survey. In terms of negative emotions, about 38 per cent of Albertans reported feeling lots of stress and worry and 55 per cent felt quite tired.

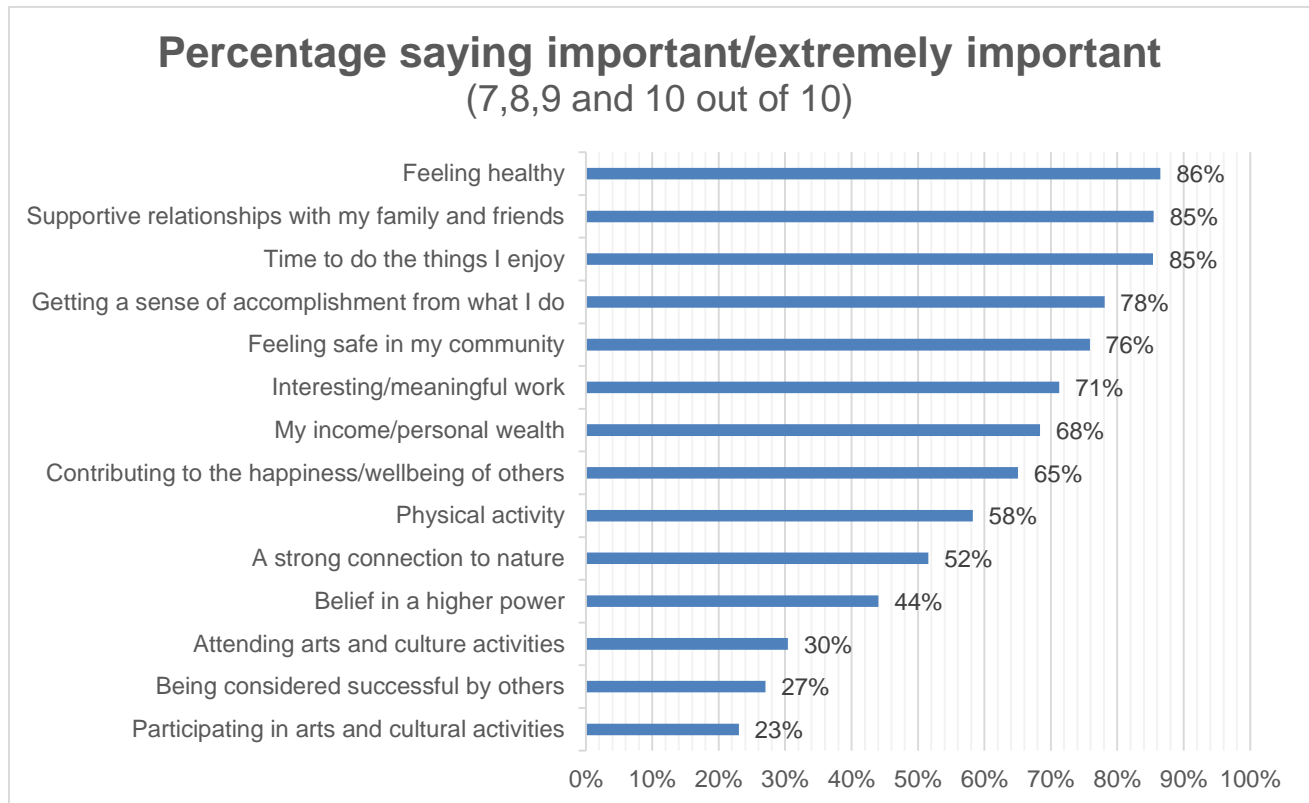


Question: The following questions ask about how you felt yesterday on a scale from zero to ten. Zero means you did not experience the emotion at all yesterday while ten means you experienced the emotion all of the time yesterday. These charts show the percentage of respondents who said six or higher. Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

## What makes Albertans happy?

For most people, “don’t worry, be happy” is a lot easier to say than do. We also know that our happiness is about more than just the *absence* of worry or sadness. We need to *know what makes us happy* so we can make sure we are doing those things rather than something else.

When we asked Albertans what makes them happy, three things topped the list: feeling **healthy**, supportive **relationships** with family and friends, and **time** to do the things they enjoy. Over eight in ten Albertans rate the importance of these factors as a seven or more out of ten.



Question: On a scale of zero to ten with zero being "not important" and ten being "extremely important," please rate the importance of each of the following to your overall happiness. Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

Does money buy happiness? You probably know of someone who, despite having more than enough money, is unhappy. You may also know someone who is devoting all of their time and energy to a high-paying job when it’s clear they would be happier if they quit and did something else. There are also urban legends about lottery winners who get divorced or lose all their friends. And you’d probably agree that you can’t put a price on a beautiful sunset or good health.

But money does make it possible to fulfil your dream of watching the sunset in Paris. Money also comes in handy when you need it to pay for the physiotherapy that makes your back pain go away. And while a loving family and a good attitude can go a long way when it comes to happiness, not having enough money to pay the rent or to fix the car you need to get to work will make even the most naturally positive person feel less happy than they otherwise would. In other words, you may

not be able to pick up a bottle of happiness at the mall, but having the financial wherewithal to make ends meet, to do the things you enjoy and to help others get the things they need (e.g., an education fund for your kids or a nicer room at the old age home for your mom) is important to our happiness, life satisfaction and emotional well-being. On some level, money matters.

Hence, it's not a surprise that 68 per cent of Albertans rate the importance of their income or personal wealth to their happiness as a seven or higher out of ten. (See below for more on the relationship between money and happiness.)

It's much lower than things like family and having a strong connection to nature, but one in four Albertans feels that being considered successful by others is important enough to give it a seven or higher out of ten. At first blush, this may seem like a fair number of Albertans are overly concerned about what others think. Upon reflection, however, this may have less to do with our insecurities than it does with the desire to feel *appreciated* by others.

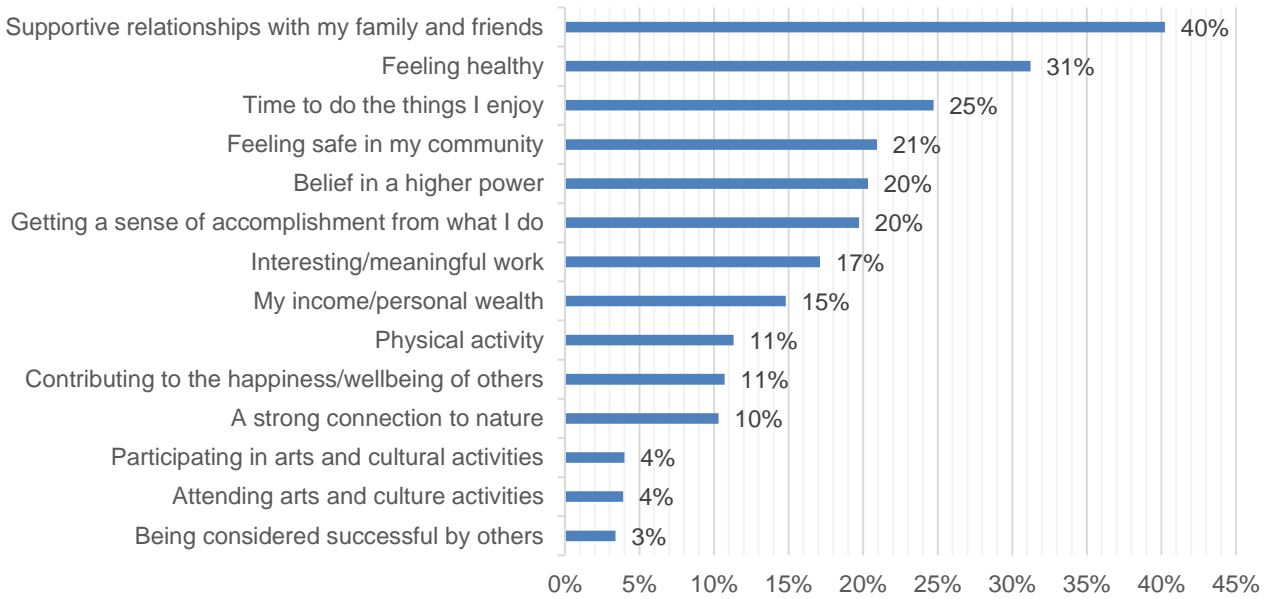
Respondents were free to rank each variable as highly as they wanted. They could have, for example, given each factor a ten out of ten in terms of its importance to their happiness. But not everyone did. As a result, a pecking order emerges with health at the top and arts and culture at the bottom. This doesn't mean that no one thinks arts and culture is important to their happiness – almost one in three Albertans says attending arts and culture activities matters a great deal to their happiness. Still, it's hard to miss that a much smaller number of Albertans feel that arts and culture is critically important to their happiness compared to things like health, relationships and time.

One possible explanation for why arts and culture doesn't resonate with people to the same degree as other things is the phrase itself. To address this, we made sure to describe arts and culture broadly as "activities such as going to the movies, seeing a play, attending a concert, going to an art gallery, attending a festival and watching street performers." Nonetheless, "arts and culture" may be conjuring images of art critics pontificating over a glass of sherry rather than the full width and breadth of ways that we entertain and express ourselves.

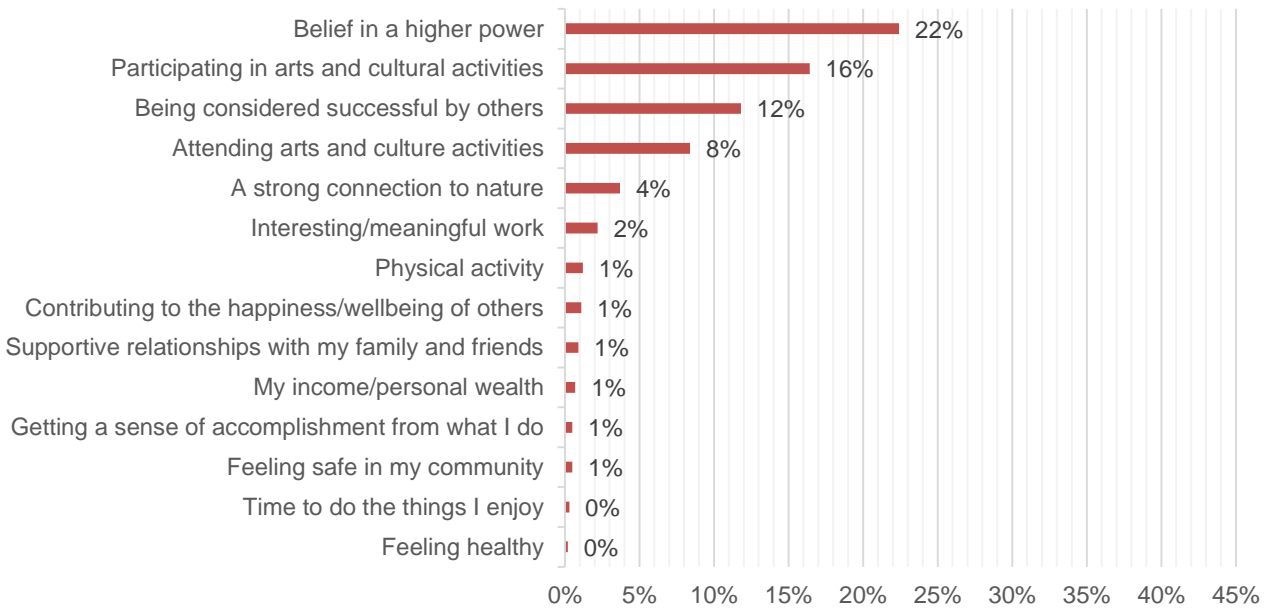
As with all the questions in the *Alberta Happiness Survey*, it would be interesting to know how we here in Alberta compare to our neighbours in the other provinces on the importance of arts and culture, but we don't have comparable data on hand.

When we look at the extremes – i.e., those who said "ten out of ten" and those who said "zero out of ten" – the basic pattern does not change but some interesting nuances come to the fore. For example, fully 40 per cent of Albertans give "supportive relationships with family and friends" a ten out of ten in terms of its impact on their happiness, propelling it to top spot ahead of "feeling healthy." While almost no one rates things like health, relationships, time, money and helping others as completely unimportant to their happiness, 16 per cent of Albertans say that "participating in arts and culture activities such as dancing, writing, acting and playing music" rates a zero out of ten and 22 per cent say the same for "belief in a higher power." Belief in a higher power is the only factor that about the same proportion of people who give it a ten out of ten give it a zero (20 per cent compared to 22 per cent, respectively). For a good number of Albertans, belief in a higher power is either really important or not important at all.

### Percentage saying extremely important (10 out of 10 on the scale)



### Percentage saying not important (0 out of 10 on the scale)

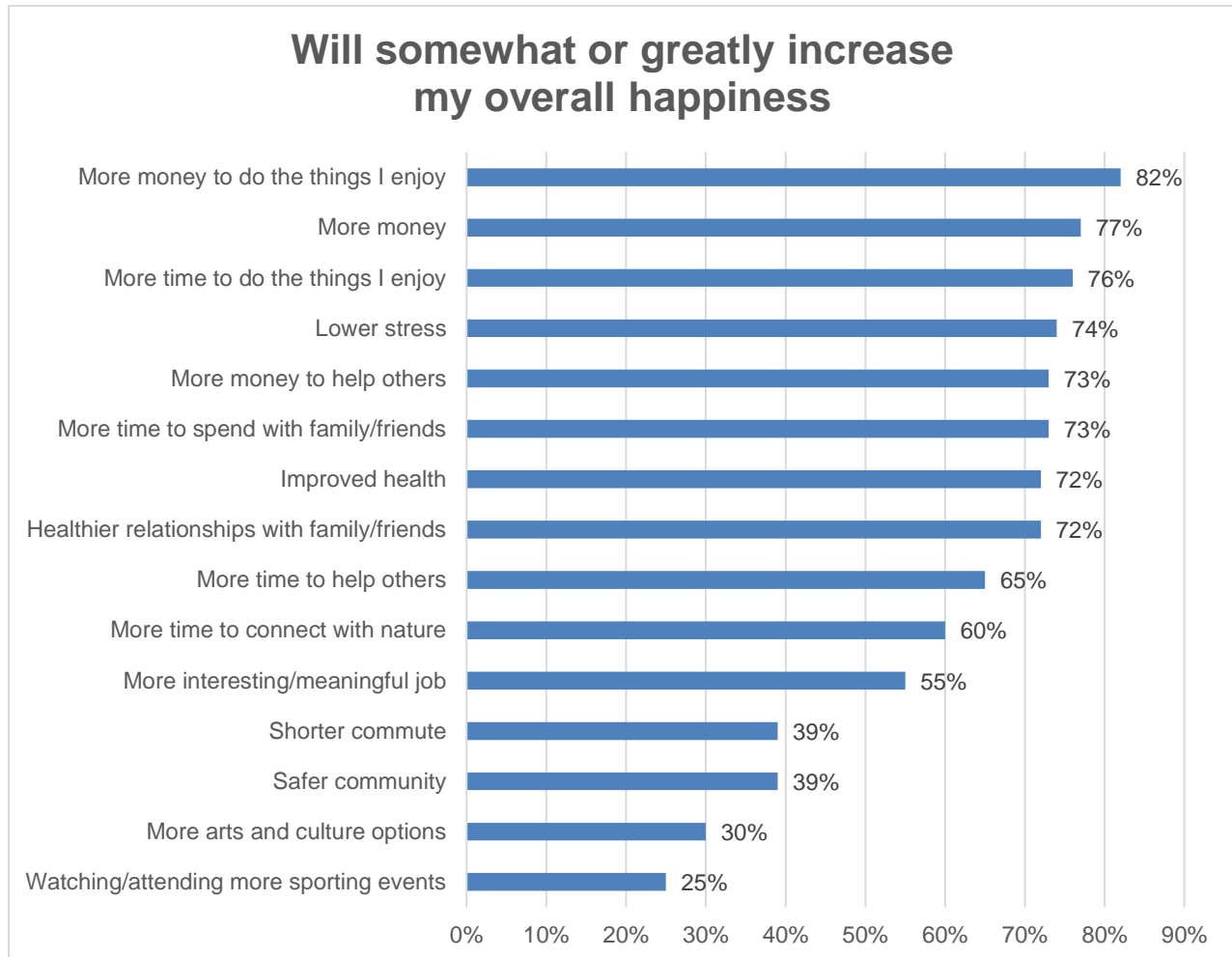


Question: On a scale of zero to ten with zero being "not important" and ten being "extremely important," please rate the importance of each of the following to your overall happiness. Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*



## More is better

Now that we have a better sense of some of the factors Albertans see as important to their happiness, we can take a look at whether or not we feel we are getting enough of each factor.

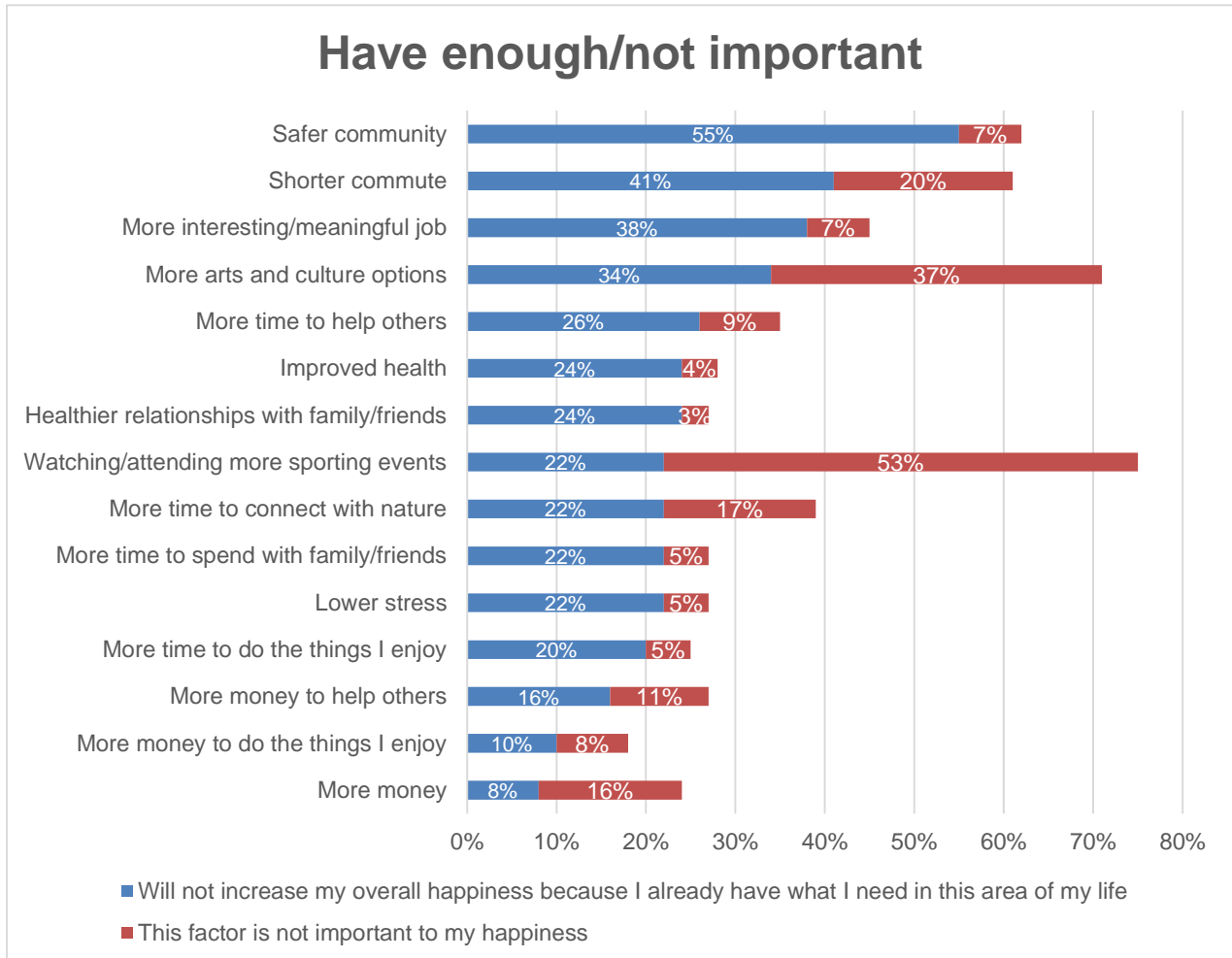


See Appendix 2 for the full list of questions and responses. Note: The “shorter commute” and “more interesting/meaningful job” responses exclude those who do not commute and those who do not need/want a job. Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

Well-intentioned Facebook posts may tell us to focus on enjoying what we have, but most of us believe that having more money – whether it’s to do the things we enjoy (82 per cent), in general (77 per cent), or to help others (73 per cent) – would increase our overall happiness.

Between 60 and 76 per cent of Albertans believe that more time to do the things they enjoy, to spend with family and friends, to help others or to connect with nature would make them happier. Less stress, better health, healthier relationships and a more interesting or meaningful job are also cited by a majority of Albertans as things that would boost their happiness.

Looking at this from the perspective of what Albertans feel they have enough of and what they do not feel is important to their happiness, 55 per cent feel that their communities are sufficiently safe such that an increase in public safety would not make them any happier. Only seven per cent of Albertans see community safety as irrelevant to their happiness. As seen on the previous chart, 39 per cent feel that safer communities would increase their happiness.



See Appendix 2 for the full list of questions and responses. Note: The “shorter commute” and “more interesting/meaningful job” responses exclude those who do not commute and those who do not need/want a job. Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

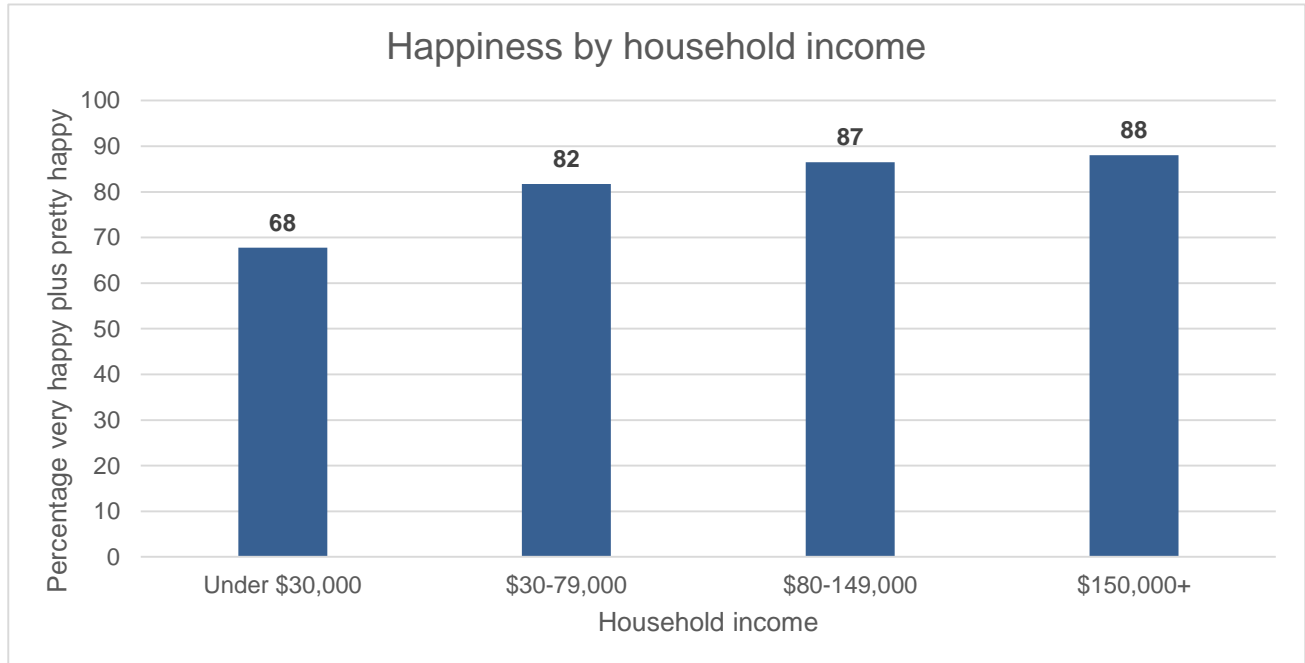
For those who commute to work, 41 per cent feel their commute is short enough that reducing it any further would have no affect on their happiness while 20 per cent don't feel that their commute affects their happiness one way or the other. About a quarter of Albertans feel fit as a fiddle, with just four per cent saying that their health doesn't matter to their happiness. About a quarter of Albertans feel that they either have enough money to be as happy as they can be (eight per cent) or that money does not matter to their happiness (16 per cent). And while it's not like no one links watching sports to their happiness (25 per cent would be happier if they could watch more sports and 22 per cent say it matters but they are watching enough to be happy), it does stand out as the one category on the list that a majority of Albertans say doesn't affect their happiness.

## Money and happiness in Alberta

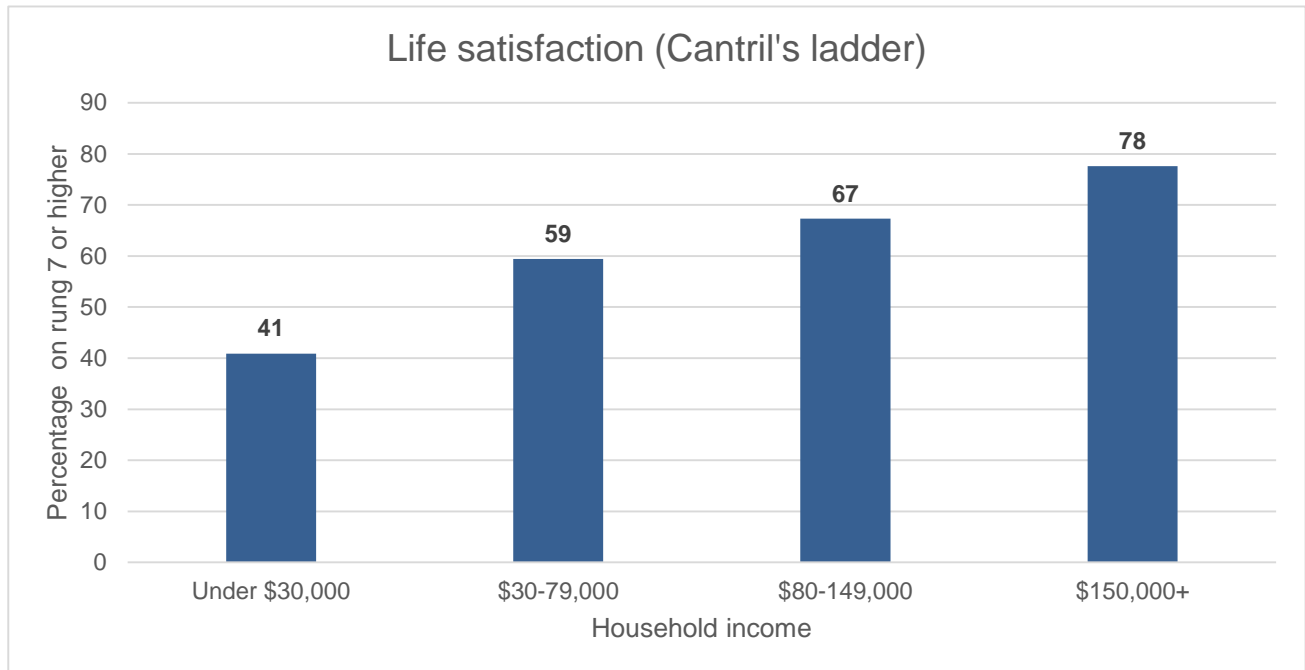
We know from our own experience and from the results of this and other surveys that not all poor people are unhappy and that not all rich people are happy. Money does not *guarantee* our happiness any more than a lack of it automatically condemns us to despair. Genetics, personal choices and the luck of the draw can all conspire to make someone happy or unhappy independent of their bank account. Does this mean that money doesn't matter to our happiness and therefore, that we shouldn't worry about helping people out of poverty or keeping Alberta's economy strong? Of course not, because we also know that a lack of money can make life hard and block access to the things that do make us happy.

Is it a case of mixed-up priorities that most Albertans see money as important to their happiness and feel that more of it would make them happier? Not at all. Other things might get in the way of happiness such as ill health or a bad attitude, but a job that pays well, money to live on in retirement and a healthy economy make room for happiness to flourish. Money is important because of what it makes possible.

Given all this, are Albertans with more money more likely to be happier than those with less? Yes they are. Two-thirds (68 per cent) of Albertans with household incomes below \$30,000 report being happy. As you move up the household income ladder, the proportion of people who say they are happy increases, peaking at 88 per cent among those with household incomes over \$150,000. Some extra income may not magically make everyone at the bottom end happy, but it might help a great deal.



Question: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy or not too happy? Source: ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015



Question: Imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time? Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

The correlation between money and happiness is particularly strong when we think of happiness in terms of *life satisfaction*. Only 41 per cent of Albertans with household incomes below \$30,000 put themselves at rung seven or higher on Cantril's ladder compared to 78 per cent of those with incomes over \$150,000. This is a startling difference. We know that self-reported happiness and life satisfaction are sensitive to how people feel they are doing [relative](#) to their neighbours and peers, so it makes sense that those at the upper end of the income scale tend to rate their satisfaction with their lives higher than those at the bottom end. With that said, a lack of satisfaction with how one's life is going is a warning sign that should be heeded. Given that just nine per cent Albertans with household incomes over \$30,000 rate their life as a four or lower out of ten, but 25 per cent of those with household income below \$30,000 do the same, we have some work to do as a society to see how we can improve this.

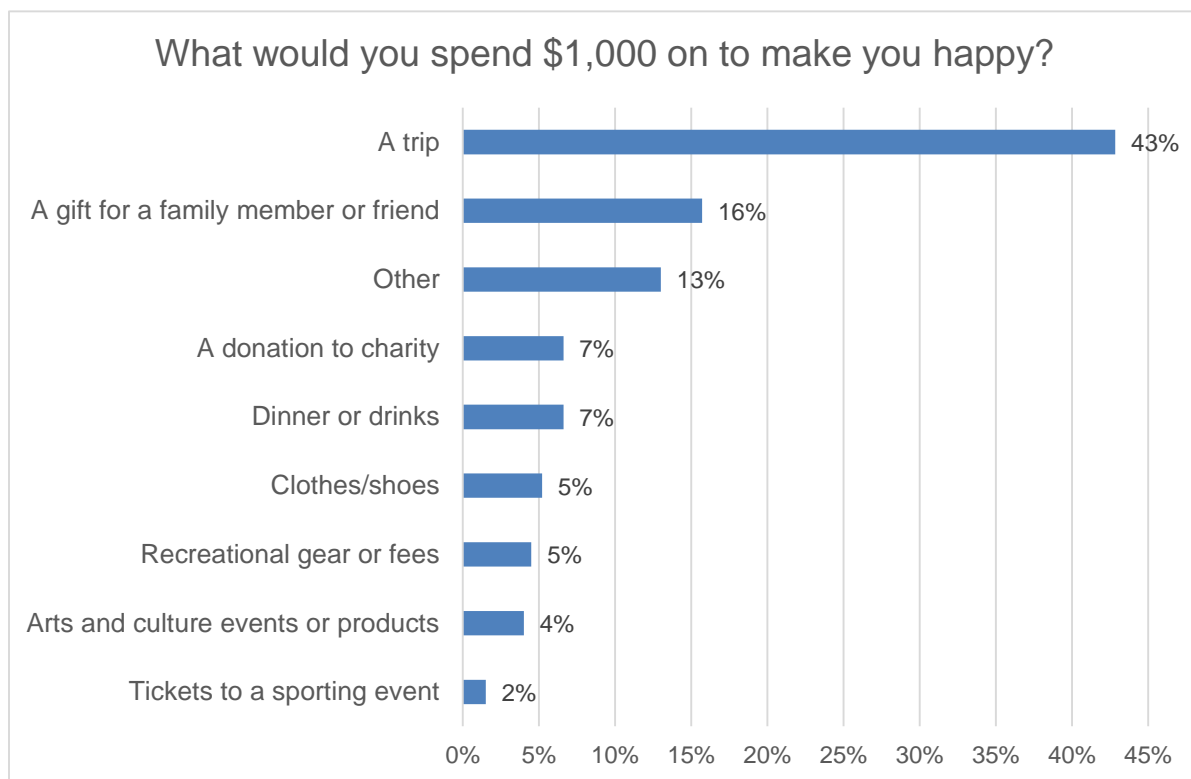
When we look at income and emotional well-being, the relationship is much less clear. For all but one of the emotional well-being indicators included in the *Alberta Happiness Survey*, household income is not a particularly good predictor of how Albertans are feeling. The exception is the question "Did you feel happy yesterday?" As with the other happiness questions, people in higher income households are somewhat more likely to say they are happy. The proportion of Albertans reporting happiness rises from 61 per cent of people with household incomes below \$30,000 reporting lots of happiness the day before the survey to 81 per cent for people with household incomes over \$150,000. At the same time, those in the \$150,000+ households are somewhat more likely to report enjoyment, calmness and smiling, and laughing a lot than households with lower incomes.

## “Extra” money and happiness

To get a better sense of what makes Albertans happy, we asked what they would do if they were given a thousand dollars to spend. The only catch was that they could not put the money into savings or pay down their debt.

The most popular option is to use the money to help pay for a trip (43 per cent). If we combine gifts given to family and friends with charitable donations, almost a quarter (23 per cent) of Albertans say giving away the \$1,000 would make them happy. Dinner out, new clothes, camping gear, art supplies and hockey tickets captured the imagination of 23 per cent of Albertans.

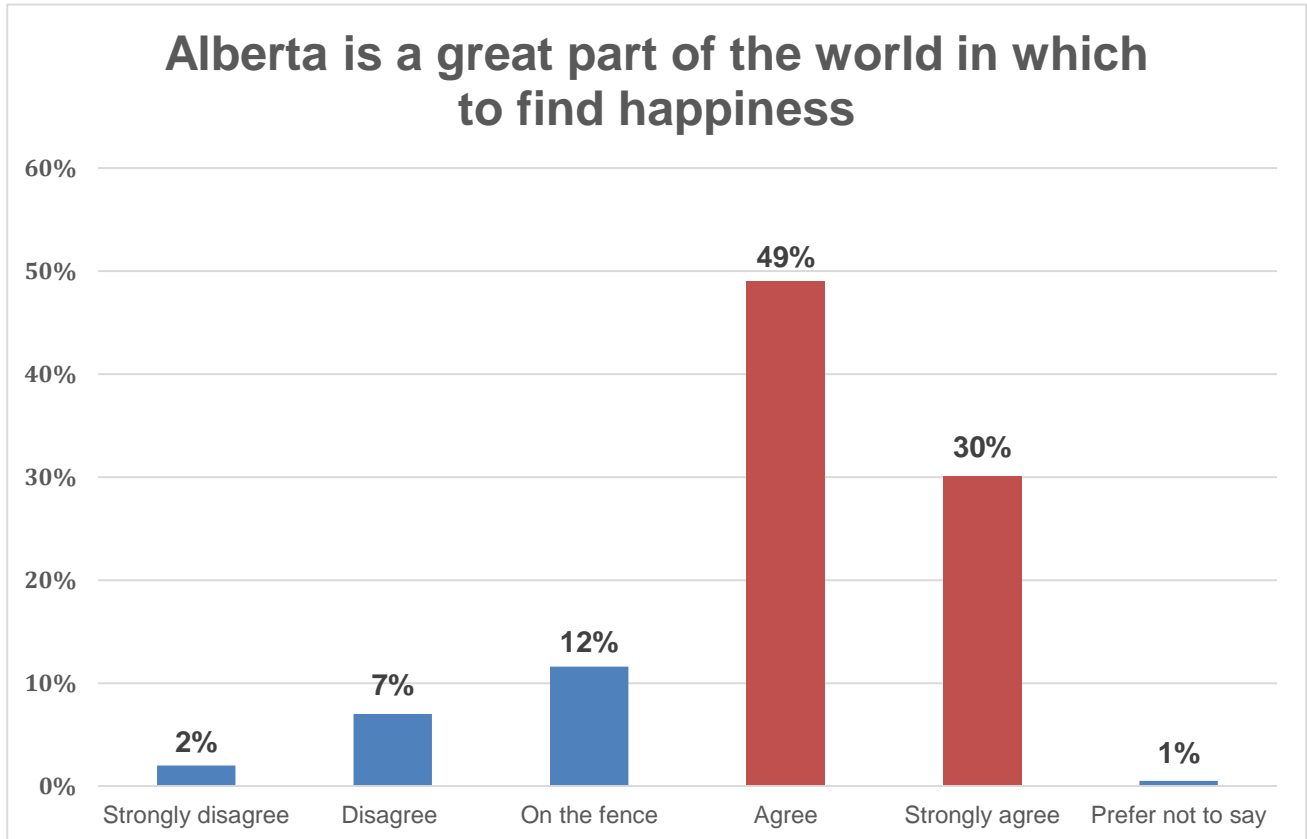
The “other” category includes everything from getting a tattoo and buying a new computer to paying for necessities and, even though the question excluded this as an option, saving the money.



Question: Imagine you are given \$1,000 to put toward the purchase of something that makes you happy. The money will disappear in 24 hours, you can't save it and you can't use it to pay off debt. Please select one response only. Would you use the money to pay/help pay for...Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

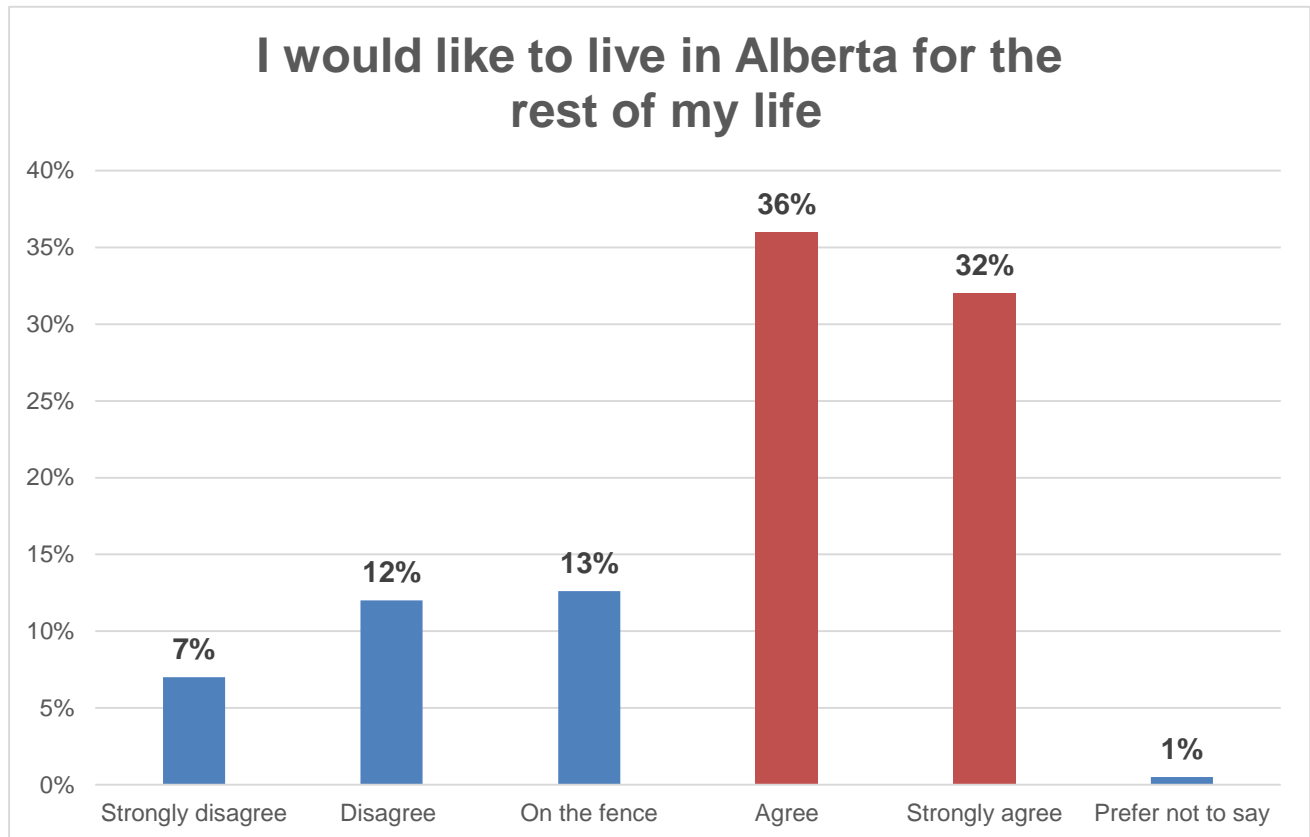
## The Alberta advantage

Most Albertans (79 per cent) feel that our province is a great place in which to find happiness. This is an encouraging finding and one of which Albertans should be proud. However, while you can't please everybody, it should still raise an eyebrow that nine per cent of Albertans disagree with this and 12 per cent are on the fence. The word "great" in the question upped the stakes, but for at least some people, something is not working for them when it comes to our province. Admittedly, our weather is not like Hawaii's and if you love the ocean the mountains and the prairie are not always a sufficient substitute. Still, it would be nice to see that 79 per cent rise into the 80s or even the 90s.



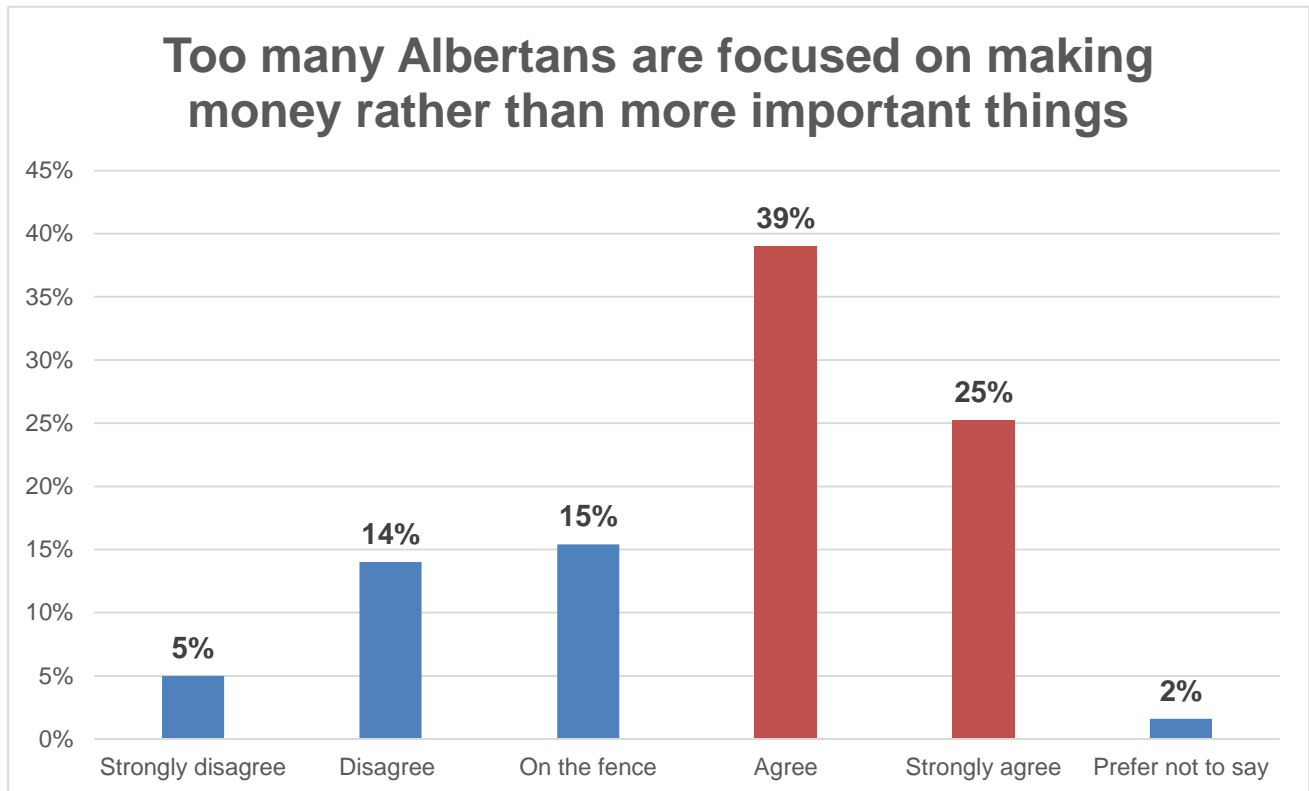
Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Alberta is a great part of the world in which to find happiness, zero=strongly disagree, ten=strongly agree. Respondents who said "five" out of "ten" are considered to be "on the fence." Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

The percentage of Albertans who think the province is a great place in which to find happiness rises with household income (71 per cent of respondents with household income below \$30,000 agree, 81 per cent with income between \$30,000 and \$150,000 agree and 86% with income over \$150,000 agree).



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement? I would like to live in Alberta for the rest of my life, zero=strongly disagree, ten=strongly agree. Respondents who said “five” out of “ten” are considered to be “on the fence.”  
 Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

This finding is a powerful statement regarding the fantastic quality of life available in Alberta: over two-thirds of us (68 per cent) say we would like to live here for the rest of our lives. Given the magnetic pull of warmer places and exotic locales, the desire to return home and other reasons someone might want to leave Alberta (even if they like it here just fine), this is a high number. Not everybody agreed strongly, but even a six or seven out of ten level of agreement on this is a pat on Alberta’s back.



Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statement? Too many Albertans are focused on making money rather than more important things, zero=strongly disagree, ten=strongly agree Respondents who said “five” out of “ten” are considered to be “on the fence.” Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

A less flattering finding is that almost two-thirds of us (64 per cent) think that too many Albertans are focused on making money at the expense of more important things. Obviously, this is a perception and not necessarily a reflection of reality. The people who we *think* are focused on money may not be and Alberta may be no different than other places when it comes to this issue. In hindsight, the question is also a bit fuzzy; how are respondents defining “too many?” Are they thinking here of a specific group such as oil barons or “kids these days?” Or are they seeing the worship of mammon as something more widespread?

Despite these limitations, the results reveal a widespread feeling among Albertans that something is amiss in the province in that “too many” of us are focused on money instead of things like family, community and the environment.



## Other factors affecting happiness

### Calgary versus Edmonton

Despite the rivalry between Alberta's two largest cities, there is not much difference between them in terms of their levels of general happiness, life satisfaction or emotional well-being. The same is true for the things Calgarians and Edmontonians say are important to their happiness and the things they say having more of would make them happier. Unfortunately, the sample size is not large enough to confidently compare smaller cities, towns and rural areas.

	Calgary	Edmonton
Very happy	17%	10%
Pretty happy	63%	70%
Not too happy	17%	18%
<b>Very happy plus pretty happy</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>80%</b>
Life satisfaction (Cantril ladder rungs 7-8)	52%	54%
Life satisfaction (Cantril ladder rungs 9-10)	11%	6%
<b>Life satisfaction (Cantril ladder rungs 7-10)</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>61%</b>

Questions: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy or not too happy? Imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time? Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

### Women versus men

A slightly larger proportion of women in Alberta report being happy than do men (83 per cent compared to 79 per cent, respectively) and the same is true for life satisfaction (65 per cent of women report a life satisfaction level of seven or higher out of ten compared to 60 per cent of men). In the grand scheme of things, these are marginal differences. When it comes to measures of emotional well-being, the survey results show that women and men feel about the same, with women a little more likely to report feeling both positive and negative emotions.

Women are also a little more likely to say that supportive relationships with friends and family, connecting with nature, belief in a higher power, safe communities and helping others are important to their happiness. For example, 90 per cent of women say that supportive relationships with family and friends are important to their happiness compared to 81 per cent of men; 57 per cent of women feel that connecting with nature is important to their happiness compared to 46 per cent of men; 49 per cent of women say that belief in a higher power is important compared to 39 per cent of men;

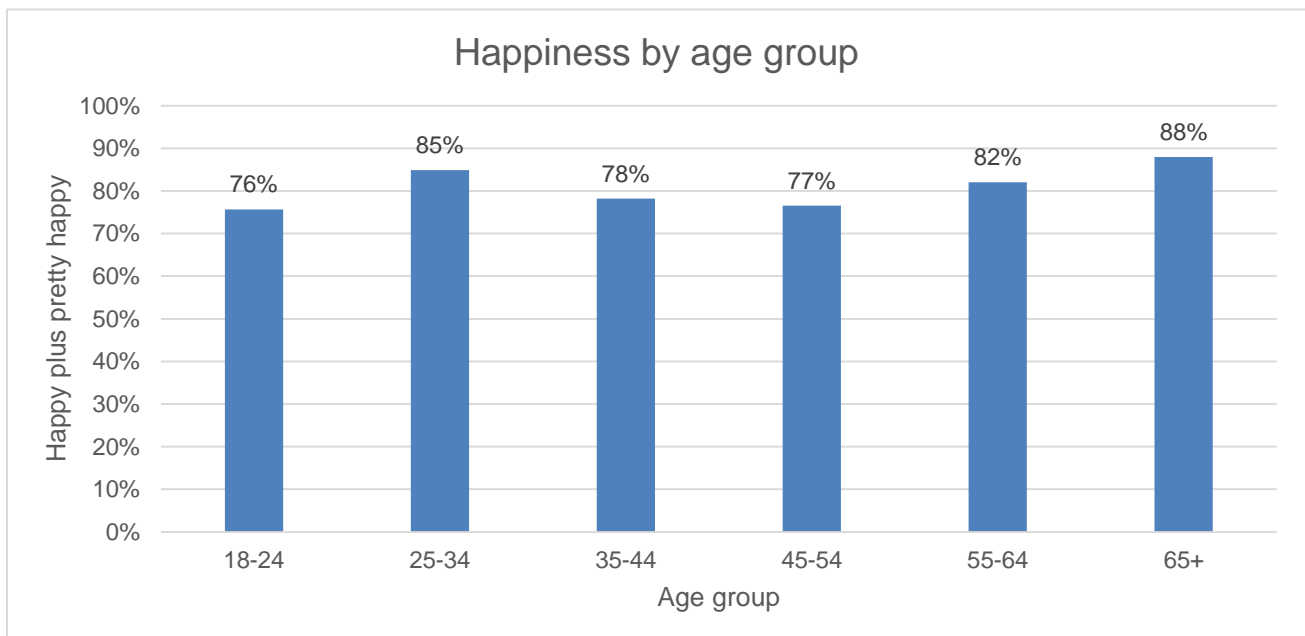
and 81 per cent of women feel that safe communities are key to their happiness compared to 71 per cent of men.

The differences are smaller between the genders when it comes to what people say would increase their happiness if they had more of it. The only factor that really stands out is watching sports with 16 per cent of women saying they would like more of this compared to 34 per cent of men. The next largest gap is a seven point difference between the proportion of men (30 per cent) who would be happier if they had a shorter commute compared to women (23 per cent).

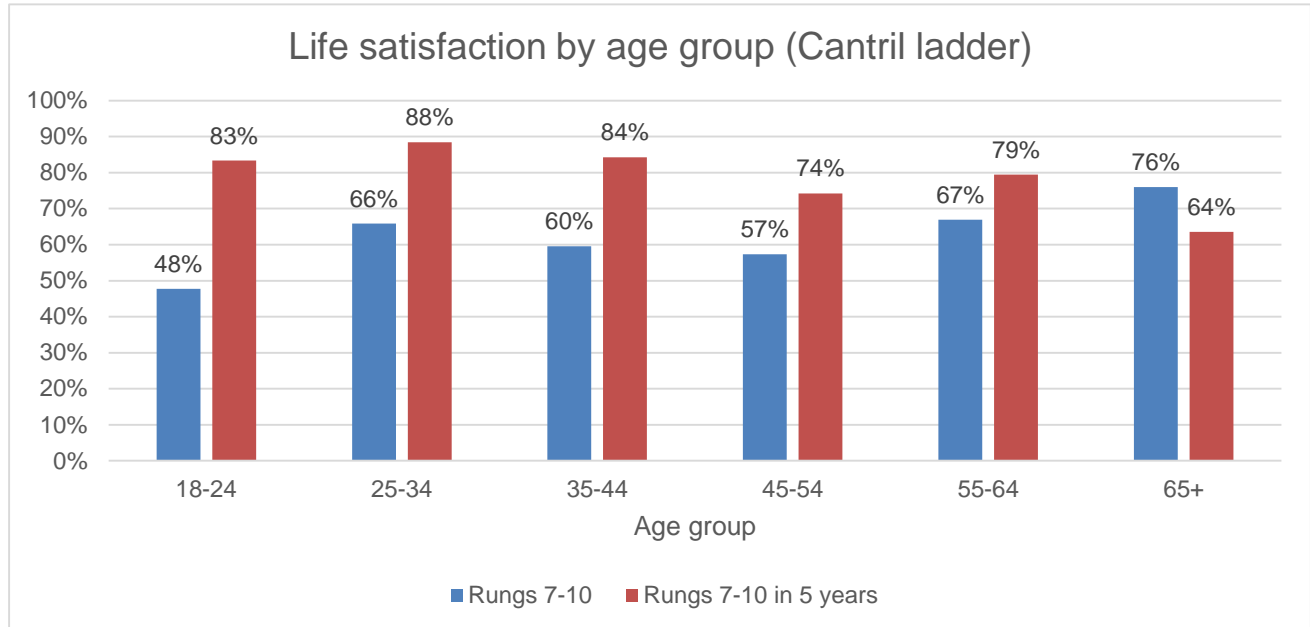
### Young versus old

Your age does not seem to make a whole lot of difference in how happy you are except at the extremes. At least three-quarters of each age group reports being happy, but there is a gap of 12 percentage points between those 18 to 24 years of age and those 65 and over (76 per cent compared to 88 per cent).

The difference in life satisfaction levels is starker. Only 48 per cent of 18 to 24-year olds say they are at rung seven or higher on Cantril's life satisfaction ladder compared to 76 per cent of seniors. This is probably a good thing: you should be a little "hungry" when you are young in terms of how satisfied you are with your life whereas it's a good sign that most seniors can look at their lives and say "I feel pretty good about where I am at." When we ask on which rung of the ladder people think they will be on in five years, the percentage for the 18 to 24-year old group jumps to 83 per cent. Indeed, every age group feels confident that they will be feeling more satisfied with their lives in five years except those over 65. Given the importance of feeling healthy to one's happiness, it's not surprising that seniors are somewhat pessimistic about how they will be doing five years down the road.



Question: Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy or not too happy? Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*



Question: Imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. Suppose we say the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time? Imagining the same ladder from the previous question, on which step do you think you will stand about five years from now? Source: *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015*

## Concluding thoughts

In Alberta, we face many misperceptions including that we're a place to make money and leave as fast as you can. This is one reason why the results of the *ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey* were so pleasing because they make it clear that Alberta is a happy place full of happy people. While not a surprise to those of us who call Alberta home, the results show that the province has a whole lot more going for it than its strong economy (though this is nothing to snuff at). People may come for the jobs, but they stay for the quality of life.

With that said, and taking into account that a) not everyone is going to be happy all of the time and b) the survey was conducted during an economic downturn, when some people are hurting, Alberta could be even happier. When we compare ourselves to other places, we are far from the bottom of the list, but we are also well behind the front-runners. This suggests that there is room for improvement. It would be great, for example, to do this survey in five years and see an increase in the proportion of Albertans who say they are happy.

Keeping Alberta a happy place, and making it even happier, matter because happiness is intimately linked to quality of life, strong communities, a healthy democracy, the ability to attract and retain skilled labour, lower health care costs – the list is long. From depression and stress to general grumpiness and feeling dissatisfied with how you are doing compared to your neighbours, a lack of happiness is a large red flag.

There is no magic formula for increasing the happiness of Albertans, but the survey does point to some things that would almost certainly make a difference. Finding more time to spend with family

and friends and nurturing healthy relationships with others may seem obvious, but they are still worth reminding ourselves about. On this front, we know that [the first six years of a child's life](#) are critical to their long-term well-being, social competence, communication skills and emotional maturity, and to their language, thinking and communication skills – the very things needed to form good relationships. Hence, the more we can do to support children in the early years of their development, the more likely it will be that Albertans will reach their full potential and have the tools they need to find happiness.

The importance Albertans place on the link between their health and their happiness reinforces the value of preventive health care and of a physical environment that is both healthy and welcoming to recreational activity.

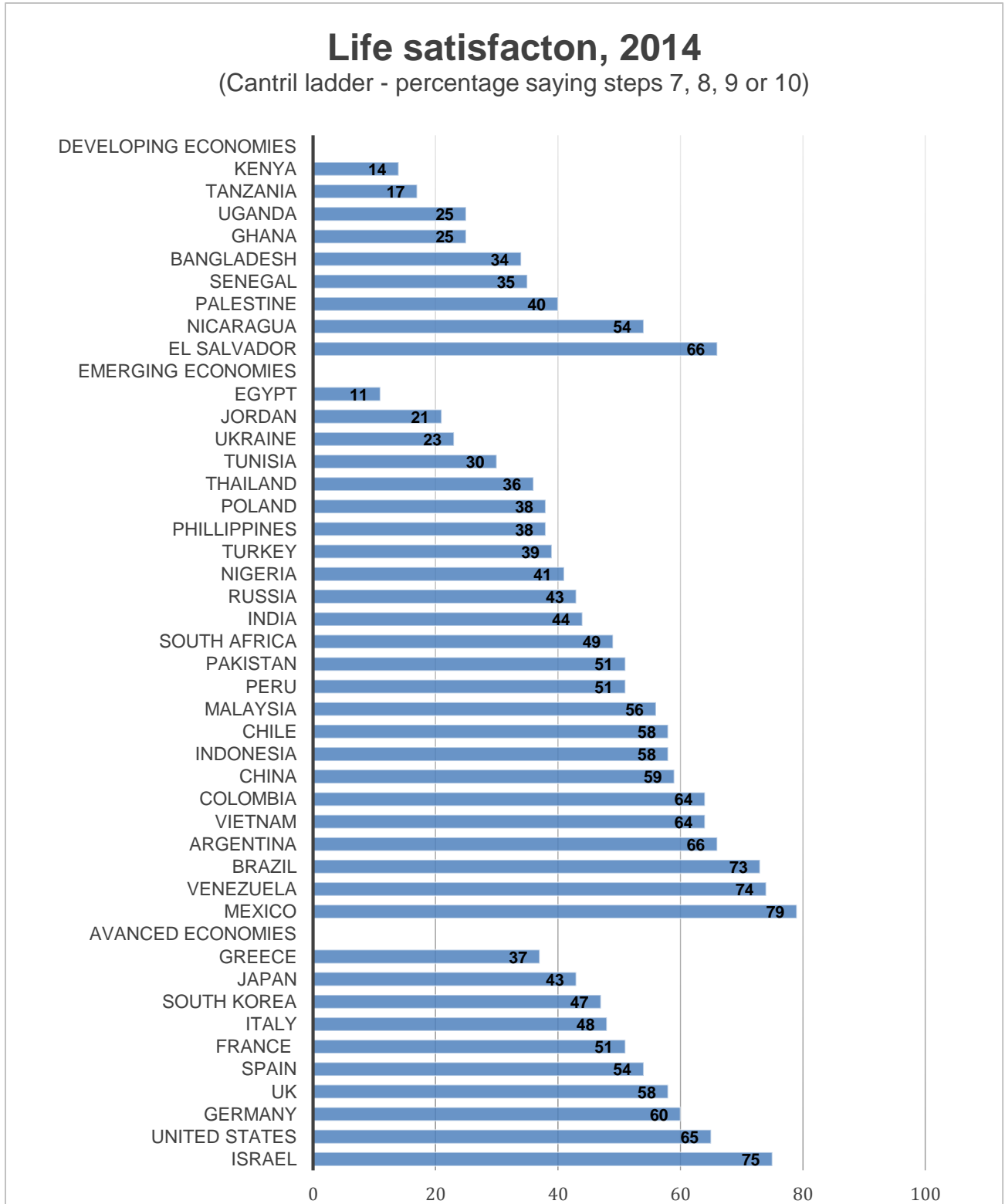
And while it's clear from this survey that Albertans do not think the person who dies with the most toys wins, maintaining Alberta's economic prosperity is critical. This does not mean that we need more and more money to be happy, but it does mean that having the money to do the things you enjoy, to help others and support good causes, to be able to go to sleep at night without worrying about how you are going to put your kids through school and all the other things money makes possible can make a huge difference. In addition, the survey results show that Albertans value interesting jobs and that unemployment is linked to lower levels of happiness. This is why a robust economy – or more accurately, the doors it opens – is important to the happiness of Albertans.

It's doing things like working long hours just to make more money at the expense of spending time with your family and friends, buying more "stuff" in lieu of addressing emotional problems or feeling jealous because your neighbour has a bigger house that cause the pursuit of money and the pursuit of happiness to work counter to one another.

It's also important to note that, like the idea of happiness itself, the survey results are an imprecise instrument. The questions we chose to ask and how we asked them, when the survey was conducted, how many people we interviewed, the assumptions respondents brought with them and many other factors mean that the results presented in this report should be seen as rough drafts rather than final statements on happiness in Alberta. We should be especially careful about making too much of small differences in the percentages of people reporting different answers. We can, however, be relatively confident that the large gaps and general trends reflect the situation on the ground in our province.

In closing, the survey reminds us that, notwithstanding the ill effects of mental illness, grief, physical pain, addiction, abuse and poverty (i.e., it's not always as easy as "don't worry be happy"), happiness is in many ways a state of mind over which we can exercise a fair degree of personal control. We can smile when we meet people on the street, spend time with people who are lonely, support one another and in a multitude of other ways *proactively* make happiness happen. Hopefully, by shining a light on happiness in Alberta, this survey and the many other efforts to understand and measure happiness going on around the world (see, for example, University of British Columbia professor John Helliwell's [World Happiness Report](#)), will help us get our heads around the topic and think about how we can spread even more happiness around this great province. As the Dalai Lama has said, "Happiness is not something ready made. It comes from our own actions."

Appendix 1: Life satisfaction, full list of countries



Spring 2014 Global Attitudes Survey, PEW Research Center

## Appendix 2: What would increase your happiness? Full list of questions

Which of the following statements is most relevant to you? Please select one response only. **More time to spend with family and friends would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I already have lots of time to spend with family/ friends.
- not increase my overall happiness because more time with family and friends is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Having healthier relationships with family and friends would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I feel my relationships are already healthy.
- not increase my overall happiness because healthy relationships are not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Having more money would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I already have enough money.
- not increase my overall happiness because more money is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Watching or attending more sporting events would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I already watch/attend enough sporting events to make me happy.
- not increase my overall happiness because watching/attending sporting events is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Having more time to do the things I enjoy would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I already have enough time to do the things I enjoy.
- not increase my overall happiness because this is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Having more money to do the things I enjoy would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I already have enough money to do the things I enjoy.
- not increase my overall happiness because having more money to do the things I enjoy is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**If my health improved, this would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I am already healthy.
- not increase my overall happiness because my health is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Having less stress in my life would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I do not feel overly stressed.
- not increase my overall happiness because this is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Having a more interesting or more meaningful job would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I feel my current job is already interesting/meaningful.
- not increase my overall happiness because it does not matter to my happiness if my job is not interesting/meaningful.
- not increase my overall happiness because I do not want or need a job right now.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**If there were more arts and culture options available in my rural area/town/city, this would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I feel there are sufficient arts and culture options available to me.
- not increase my overall happiness because arts and culture activities are not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Spending more time connecting with nature would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I feel I already spend sufficient time connecting with nature.
- not increase my overall happiness because connecting with nature is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Having more time to contribute to the happiness and wellbeing of others would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I feel I already have enough time for this.
- not increase my overall happiness because contributing to the happiness and wellbeing of others is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**Having more money to contribute to the happiness and wellbeing of others would...**

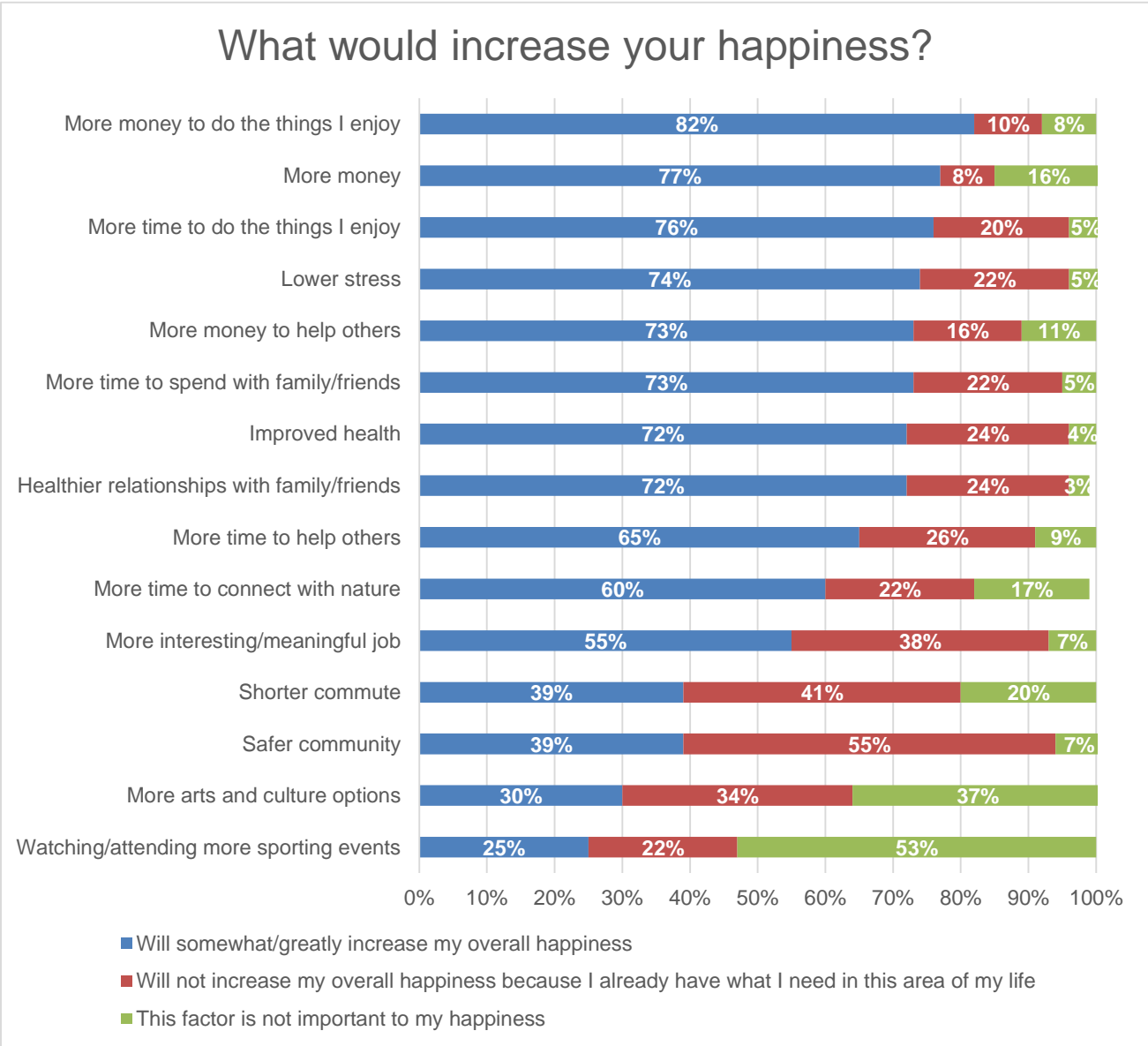
- not increase my overall happiness because I feel I already have enough money for this.
- not increase my overall happiness because contributing to the happiness and wellbeing of others is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**If my community was safer, this would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I feel my community is sufficiently safe.
- not increase my overall happiness because the safety of my community is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.

**A shorter commute to work would...**

- not increase my overall happiness because I do not commute to work.
- not increase my overall happiness because my current commute is already short.
- not increase my overall happiness because my commute time is not important to my happiness.
- somewhat increase my overall happiness.
- greatly increase my overall happiness.



Note: The “shorter commute” and “more interesting/meaningful job” responses exclude those who do not commute and those who do not need/want a job. Some bars total to more than 100 due to rounding.  
 Source: ATB Financial Alberta Happiness Survey 2015



## About the Author

### Rob Roach

As a Senior Analyst with ATB Financial's Economics and Research team, Rob examines the economic and social forces that affect Albertans' quality of life. He communicates his thoughts and findings in an effort to share ways in which we can all make Alberta an even better place to live.

Rob is also the co-author with Todd Hirsch of *The Boiling Frog Dilemma: Saving Canada from Economic Decline*. Before joining ATB, Rob was Vice President of Research at the Canada West Foundation where he spent almost 20 years analyzing and commenting on a broad array of economic, social and public policy issues. Rob has served as Treasurer and President of the Economics Society of Calgary and is currently the Vice-Chair of the Calgary Arts Academy, an Instructor for the University of Alberta's National Advanced Certificate in Local Authority Administration and a Senior Fellow with the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies. Rob has also kneaded loaves of bread as a baker, warmed tummies as a soup chef, cleaned cutlery as a dishwasher, been hung-up on as a telephone surveyor and made students happy (or sad) as a marking assistant.



Rob grew up in Calgary and holds a BA and MA in Political Science from the University of Calgary.

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