

**Title:** Adolescents' wellbeing in the United Arab Emirates: investigating geographic and socio-demographic variation and correlates

**Theme:** Child-focused indicators of social trends, policies, and child well-being

**Subtheme:** Subjective well-being

### **Authors**

Dr. Jose Marquez ([jose.marquez@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:jose.marquez@manchester.ac.uk))

Dr. Louise Lambert ([ltlamber@yahoo.com](mailto:ltlamber@yahoo.com))

Dr. Natasha Ridge ([natasha@alqasimifoundation.rak.ae](mailto:natasha@alqasimifoundation.rak.ae))

### **Thematic importance**

The relevance of this research to the ISCI Conference 2022 topic is reflected in its focus on adolescent's subjective well-being (and broader wellbeing) with consideration of a variety of wellbeing measures, in a part of the world -the United Arab Emirates (UAE)- where little research has been conducted in this area, and with a particular interest in how schools and communities can promote young people's wellbeing.

### **Introduction**

Research on adolescents' subjective well-being in the Middle East -and especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region- is scarce. The UAE is a GCC country with a diverse population and notorious differences in young people's academic outcomes across emirates and certain groups, notably gender, the national/expatriate gap, and the public/private school divide. However, little is known about geographic and socio-demographic differences in young people's subjective well-being, and how UAE's schools and communities can promote subjective well-being. Research investigating these questions with consideration of a variety of subjective well-being -and broader wellbeing- outcomes is also scarce. This research addresses these gaps.

### **Methods**

We estimated a series of linear, logistic and multilevel regression models to analyse data on 15-year-old adolescents from the UAE (n 19,277) who participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment study in 2018. Our outcome variables include overall life satisfaction, positive and negative affects, meaning and purpose in life, and mental health

difficulties. Geographic variation was investigated across the 7 emirates and the socio-demographic differences studied include gender, family wealth, immigrant background, school sector (public/private) and school type (e.g. British school, etc.). The correlates studied include factors in a variety of domains such as time-use, relationships, body image, and school characteristics, among others.

## **Results**

Our results show that overall life satisfaction is higher in the northern emirates, and among males, those better off and those attending public schools. Among those attending private schools, overall life satisfaction is lower among those attending British schools than among those attending American or Indian schools. Those attending British schools are also less satisfied with their body image and, especially, their time-use. Most of the geographic and socio-demographic differences described above remain for positive and negative affects, meaning and purpose in life, and mental health difficulties -although with some exceptions (e.g. no gender differences in meaning and purpose in life). Considering findings from previous research, the proportion of the variation in wellbeing explained at the school level seems larger in the UAE (7-10%) than in most nations, and it differs across wellbeing measures, emirates and groups. Finally, we also identify a variety of policy-relevant factors associated with adolescents' wellbeing, and some of these associations differ across wellbeing measures.

## **Conclusions and implications**

There is room for interventions in UAE's schools and communities to promote young people's wellbeing, but nuanced approaches that account for geographic and socio-demographic differences are needed. Implications are discussed regarding the importance of collecting and analysing data on a variety of wellbeing measures, and the findings involving British schools and British children overseas.