

'Happy' Kiwis worry beneath the surface - The Dominion Post, 30 October 2009

On the surface, we are a happy bunch, with a snapshot of Kiwis showing 86 per cent of people are satisfied with their lives.

Wellingtonians were the most prepared for an emergency and felt the safest walking their city streets alone at night.

But dig a little deeper and there is discontent. Half of those questioned in a recent survey say they have major problems with their housing and one in seven are struggling to come up with enough money for everyday needs.

The New Zealand General Social Survey interviewed 8721 people from April last year to March.

Statistics New Zealand manager Conal Smith said the focus was on how people were doing across all areas of life.

The survey shows how changes in economic and social conditions, such as health and income, affect us. It will be repeated every two years.

The survey ended on the eve of recession and the next in 2011 would show its impact, Mr Smith said.

But with one in seven people saying they did not have enough money, it reveals that, even before the recession, Kiwis were finding times tough.

Family Budgeting Services chief executive Raewyn Fox said that was no surprise, with people struggling daily.

"It's not for luxuries, it's a roof over their head, food and power. They are living on a real fine line."

Half of people reported having major problems with housing; most of them were concerned over heating, the size of their homes and neighbourhood noise. Housing Minister Phil Heatley said many would also be referring to their inability to afford the house they wanted.

Since the survey was carried out in 2008, home affordability had improved, because of falling interest rates and stabilising rents, he said.

Many of the people surveyed would also have had problems with the quality of their homes.

Mr Heatley said the Government was investing heavily in upgrading the "slum" standard of its 68,000 Housing New Zealand properties, and changes to the Residential Tenancies Act would help improve the results in the next survey.

The \$3 million survey found one in 10 people had been discriminated against in the past year.

Most of the cases related to nationality, race, ethnic group or "skin colour" and included 23 per cent of Asian people and 16 per cent of Maori.

Race Relations Commissioner Joris de Bres said the survey was a positive step towards measuring whether discrimination was going up or down.

Civil Defence and Emergency Management Ministry director John Hamilton said the public's preparedness for an emergency varied between regions, and that could be a reflection of how often they experienced events such as earthquakes and flooding.

Only about 10 per cent of people were fully prepared for an emergency both at home and at work, and the message still needed to get through that, in the first few days after a disaster, people would need to look after themselves.

BIAS AND RECESSION HIT HOME

Whitby father-of-two Mike Young has experienced first-hand the kind of discrimination one in 10 New Zealanders encountered during the year the survey was done.

Although he is a third-generation Kiwi, it is not unusual for people to assume Mr Young, 34, cannot speak English. "There's a lot of naive people around," he says.

His wife Juliet, 37, says the last time the couple went into an electronics store, staff thought her husband was an exchange student. "People make assumptions. It's not in a mean way."

Although Mr Young was made redundant last month, his wife says the family – like 86 per cent of those surveyed – are happy with their lot. "More New Zealanders would be too if they went overseas, and realised how good it really is here."

The couple found the results of the survey unsurprising. Other aspects of their lives are also in line with its findings.

Mrs Young says living in the Wellington region could explain the family's preparedness for a civil defence emergency, but having two young children has also made them realise how important it is to be ready.

In their garage they have supplies that would last for three days.

Daniel, 4, and Jasmine, 2, have their own small backpacks which include treats and crayons to keep them entertained should they be evacuated or cut off for days.

Every six months, the family checks food use-by dates and batteries, and replaces the water bottles in their stash, Mrs Young says.

"Hopefully, we will never need it, but it's made me feel better."

Although the couple would like a bit more money to fix up their house, they are happy with where they live.

Yet the number of older houses in Wellington could explain why so many residents feel they have a major problem with their house or neighbourhood, Mr Young says.

STATE OF THE NATION

Satisfaction: 86 per cent are satisfied with their life.

Money: One in seven did not have enough for everyday life. Aucklanders were 112 times more likely than Wellingtonians to struggle for daily needs.

Discrimination: 1 in 10 had been discriminated against in the previous 12 months over their nationality, ethnic group or skin colour. Almost one in four Asian people said they had experienced discrimination.

Housing: Half of those surveyed had major problems with their house and neighbourhood. They complained of houses being too small or cold, and noisy neighbourhoods.

Emergency: Less than half were prepared for an emergency. But Wellingtonians fared best, with 51 per cent having enough stored water for three days. People in Canterbury were the least prepared.

Safe: One third felt unsafe walking alone in their neighbourhood at night but, among those in cities, people in Wellington worried the least.

Health: 88 per cent said they were in excellent or good health.

Volunteering: One third of people did voluntary work in the past month, with Pacific people the most willing to give up their time.

Kids: Childless couples are the happiest, with 90 per cent satisfied with life.

Recycling: We are going green, with 75 per cent saying they recycle. Aucklanders are the most eco-friendly. South Islanders are falling behind.