



## The Wellbeing Project

Santa Monica, California, United States

*“It sounded simple. We’ll measure what matters most: how people are doing. And then use that information to guide our work. There was just one thing: no one had ever done it before.”*

**Julie Rusk**, Santa Monica City Hall

### SUMMARY

Are citizens happy, healthy and connected as a community? Do they have access to opportunities for a lifetime of learning and growth? Do they feel empowered to make change? Does the local economy help them achieve their goals? What can we do to help them thrive? These are some of the questions the City of Santa Monica, a small beachfront community bordered by Los Angeles, set out to answer in its quest to put wellbeing at the centre of its work. The city is tapping into the power of data to understand the needs, challenges, and strengths of the community in order to make decisions that will improve people’s lives and strengthen the community. This is the Wellbeing Project.<sup>52</sup> At its core is the Wellbeing Index, which combines multiple sources of data to measure a full spectrum of factors known to impact one’s wellbeing, and in turn, the wellbeing of the community. By providing a common language, mission, and goals for the city organisation, the Index framework is helping the city work more effectively across departments and with community partners. Findings from the Index guide the city’s efforts to cultivate partnerships, set policies, and develop programs to help all residents thrive. It also provides information to empower community members to take charge of improving their own wellbeing.

52. [www.smgov.net/wellbeing](http://www.smgov.net/wellbeing)

## THE PROBLEM

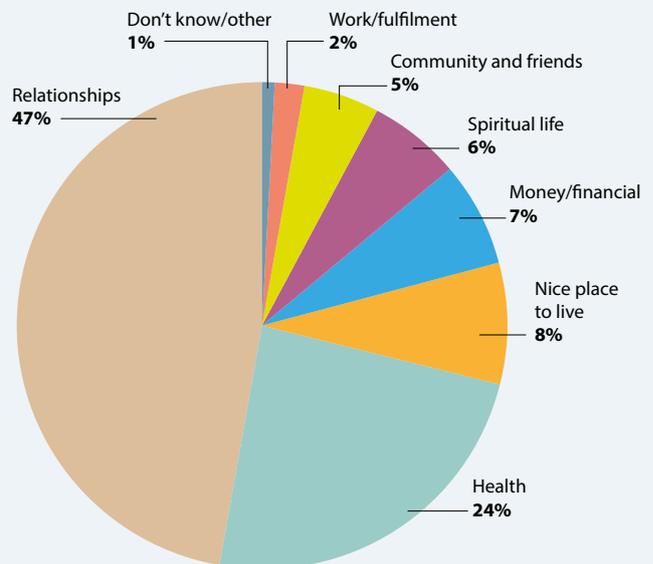
Governments around the world are starting to recognize that economic growth alone does not truly represent the strength or success of a community. True measures must take people into account. How are they doing? What challenges do they face? What decisions can we make to help them address those challenges? So a few years ago, Santa Monica – a city known for its commitment to innovative approaches to tackling complex issues – was rocked by a quick succession of tragedies involving local youth. A teen was shot and killed in a park. Another teen committed a public suicide in front of his classmates.



And then a young adult who grew up in Santa Monica committed a shooting at a community college while in session, resulting in 6 dead and many more traumatized. Santa Monica – the city, school district, community college, service providers, and concerned citizens came together to find the answer to one question: “How, in a community as resourced as ours, can this be happening?”

This was a call to action that could not be ignored. The city and community realized that they needed to be able to better understand the critical issues faced by citizens. They did not have the ability to objectively assess trends, counter challenges, and celebrate strengths from a holistic perspective. Without this, it would be difficult to make decisions and then know if those decisions were truly making a positive impact.

**Figure 4.4: Factors that influence happiness**



Source : Adapted from Sustainable Development Commission, 2009.

## AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

This call to action prompted this small community to look to data in order to genuinely understand how people were doing in order to form effective strategies to work together to address the complex issues lying under the surface. Because of its relatively small size and wide range of community assets, Santa Monica is an excellent urban laboratory to test out innovative solutions. For example, the city was at the forefront of use of data to improve environmental conditions, sustain and increase affordable housing, and address homelessness with compassion. What began as a broad community effort to address youth violence by focusing on underlying factors was scaled up into an effort to better understand the wellbeing of the community as a whole, regardless of age, background, and other socioeconomic characteristics, based on the science of wellbeing, such as the factors that contribute to happiness (see Figure 4.4).

The result was the Wellbeing Project, an innovative approach to put data to work to help local government better understand and meet the needs of the people it serves. Inspired by Santa Monica’s previous innovations, the concept was developed with input from the public, city staff, and community partners. It moved from concept toward reality thanks to funding from Bloomberg

**Figure 4.5: Six dimensions of the Wellbeing Index**



Source: <http://wellbeing.smgov.net/about/wellbeing-index>.

Philanthropies, as one of five winners in the first Mayors Challenge to ignite innovation in local government.<sup>53</sup>

The key component of the Wellbeing Project is the Wellbeing Index, which provides city officials with a multidimensional picture of the existing strengths, gaps, and challenges faced by community members through analysis of data yielded from multiple sources. The framework for the Index was developed by the city, in partnership with RAND Corporation and an international panel of experts. It provides comprehensive measures on community wellbeing across a number of dimensions (see Figure 4.5).<sup>54</sup>

**NOVELTY**

The Wellbeing Project is a ground-breaking model for local government that uses the science of wellbeing and multiple data perspectives as a lens through which they can better understand the people it serves. The Index includes data yielded from administrative, behavioural, and subjective sources. By blending these things together, the city and its partners are able to look beyond traditional performance measures to truly understand the complex

interplay of factors that impact one’s quality of life. The Index includes factors like affordability, mobility, stress, equity, and purpose. This makes it possible for the City of Santa Monica to orient its work in a way that residents can intuitively understand, and to measure our impact in a more meaningful way.

**IMPACT AND RESULTS**

The City of Santa Monica is making great strides toward truly embedding wellbeing metrics into everything it does. The first iteration of the Index created a baseline for understanding the elements that contribute to positive wellbeing.<sup>55</sup> Since then, Santa Monica’s Wellbeing Index framework has become the new operating system for the organization. It is being used by all city departments to form

the next city budget and work plan priorities. It is also being used to engage with community partners and residents in new ways to work together on key issues and to bring the community together to enhance wellbeing through social connections, an important aspect of wellbeing (see Figure 4.6). In addition, it has prompted the city organization to take a hard look at its data culture and actively work to improve it.

53. See <http://mayorschallenge.bloomberg.org>.

54. See [wellbeing.smgov.net/about/partners-and-panel](http://wellbeing.smgov.net/about/partners-and-panel) for more information on partnering organisations and experts.

55. See <http://wellbeing.smgov.net/about/wellbeing-index> for detailed findings from the Wellbeing Index.

Finally, the Project has generated a renewed sense of purpose among civil servants, giving them a new way think, talk, and feels proud about their work.

**REPLICABILITY**

Wellbeing and happiness are universal objectives for any community. With a desire to improve the wellbeing and happiness of others, Santa Monica designed the Wellbeing Project with replicability in mind. It is an open source project, so the methods and tools can be shared and duplicated by other communities interested in enhanced wellbeing. To this end, the city is working on a playbook to help transfer knowledge and share lessons. A longer-term goal is the cultivation of a network of communities that, once armed with common data and metrics, can learn from each other. Furthermore, as the wellbeing results for Santa Monica are available as open data, private and non-profit organisations have used them to emphasise wellbeing in their products and services.

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**CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The Wellbeing Project surfaced a number of underlying challenges common among cities the size of Santa Monica, including outmoded ways of operating and inconsistencies within the organization’s data culture. The city has learned that it needs to find ways to better align its work efforts across departments, advance data literacy across the board, take a more objective and proactive approach to problem solving, and cultivate more meaningful and constructive relationships with its constituencies. This has already generated significant shifts in how the organization operates and works together.

**Figure 4.6: Importance of social connections**



Source : <http://wellbeing.smgov.net/findings/community>