

# Summary

## Social State of the Netherlands

How are the Dutch faring and how satisfied are they with their lives? Key points and concluding discussion

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## Summary

The central theme addressed in the ‘Social State of the Netherlands’ (SSN) report series is the quality of life of the Dutch population. The report covers both the actual (objective) and perceived (subjective) quality of life. Using key figures, the various chapters in this report provide a summary of the quality of life of different groups in the Dutch population in diverse areas of daily life. These key figures cover a period of ten years, and the report also describes the context of general economic, demographic and ecological developments over the same period, as well as the climate of public opinion. The SSN is part of a long international research tradition of social monitors which seek to track, describe and explain social and cultural trends. In so doing, they provide systematic information on developments in the quality of life of different sections of a country’s population (Noll & Berger 2014; Roes 2001). This information makes it possible to highlight social problems and disadvantage, in order to inform politicians and policymakers.

In this concluding chapter we discuss the main trends highlighted in the report, in order to answer the question of how the Dutch population is faring. We examine objective and subjective quality of life and the relationship between the two. The SSN has always covered both these aspects of quality of life, but this edition devotes extra attention to the correspondences and discrepancies between the objective and subjective situation. Where the data allowed this, we looked at how closely a person’s objective life situation corresponds with their own perception of their life. Which groups are doing well – or badly – in objective terms, and does this match the way they feel about their lives? And for which groups (or in which domains) does the people’s objective life situation differ from the way they see and rate their lives? Using these insights enables us to explore the notion of (dis)satisfaction in more depth. A good deal of government policy is directed towards improving the objective life situation of Dutch citizens (such as increasing their resources), but it is unclear whether this also has an impact on their subjective perception of their lives.

We also explore the relationship between ‘quality of life’ and ‘quality of society’. Quality of life is concerned with people’s personal lives, whereas quality of society is about social outcomes such as social cohesion or inequality and trust in politics and society.

Finally, based on the trends found we discuss three social issues which will demand attention in the near future from politics and society: growing uncertainty about the future; inequality of opportunity; and the dominant perception that oppositions between different sections of society are growing.

Compared with other countries in Europe, average quality of life in the Netherlands is high. The 2017 edition of SSN (Bijl et al. 2017) concluded that quality of life in the Netherlands has improved in many areas over a prolonged period of 25 years; in this edition, however, it is notable that quality of life did not improve between 2008 and 2018. This was an economically turbulent period and, while incomes have now broadly recovered from the crisis, the

economic revival in recent years has not (yet) been translated into an improvement in people's general objective life situation. Subjectively, the Dutch are on average fairly satisfied with their own lives, and this perception changes little over time, neither suffering heavily during the crisis nor responding positively to the economic recovery now.

That, at least, is the average situation; in practice, there are wide differences in the quality of life of different groups in the population. This has been the case for several years, suggesting a number of stubborn differences in quality of life, related to education, income, having or not having work, or suffering from a disorder or illness.

Objective quality of life did improve over the last decade for some groups in the population and in some life domains. For example, the female labour participation rate increased (albeit mostly in part-time work), the general quality of life of the over-65s improved, and the life expectancy and education level of both men and women increased. As regards subjective quality of life, there was an increase both in the share of people with low life satisfaction and (to a more limited extent) in the share of people with high life satisfaction.

This edition ssN looks specifically at the correlation or discrepancy between objective and subjective quality of life, and concludes that people who are dissatisfied with all or parts of their life are generally also doing less well objectively. There is a group comprising roughly 9% of the population who are doing extremely well both objectively and subjectively, and a small group (3% of the population) who are doing badly both objectively and subjectively. There is thus a small section of Dutch society whose quality of life lags behind the rest of the population in both objective and subjective terms. The size and composition of this group is stable over time; it is made up of people who generally have few resources and who are very pessimistic about their opportunities and capabilities.

These general conclusions are explored in more detail below by outlining the observed developments in the different thematic areas covered by the ssN. We look first at objective quality of life (§13.1), then at subjective quality of life (§13.2). Next we describe where and for whom objective and subjective quality of life correlate or diverge (§13.3). Finally, in section 13.4 we look at satisfaction with and opinions on society, then conclude with a description of a number of social issues that are pertinent for the near future (§13.5).

## 5.1 Objective quality of life: life situation

Despite the economic revival, the general objective quality of life of the Dutch is not increasing according to the Life Situation Index,<sup>1</sup> and differences between population groups remain. Trends in people's personal resources (income, employment, education and health) and changes in their daily lives (housing, social safety, leisure time and social participation) provide an insight into the background to these developments.

### No improvement in life situation and wide variation between groups

The objective quality of life of Dutch citizens in 2018, measured using the Life Situation Index, was the same as in 2008. It improved between 2008 and 2010, after which it deteriorated; and, while that deterioration does not appear to be continuing, it has also not reversed. This suggests that the economic recovery has not yet been translated into an improvement in people's personal quality of life. It is usual for economic trends to work through into quality of life with some time lag. During an economic downturn, businesses first see their profits decline, then government cuts spending, and the public are the last to feel the (negative) impact. The phases are the same during an economic recovery, but in a positive direction: companies benefit first, then the government, and finally the public. We have seen this pattern before. For example, the oil crisis in the early 1980s led to a deterioration in people's life situation in the middle of the decade, while the economic prosperity at the end of the last century led to a sharp improvement in life situation at the start of this century. Compared with the 1990s, however, the improvement in people's life situation is now taking longer to materialise (cf. Boelhouwer 2010).

Most groups in the population have seen no change in their life situation. Existing differences in situation between those on high and low incomes, people working and not working, people with and without disorders or illnesses, have also remained substantial and stubborn over the last ten years. This is striking in the light of the policy aim of reducing these differences. The motto 'building bridges' adopted in the 2012 Government Coalition Agreement expresses this aim in strong terms, as specified in the Introduction:

*[We see] it is our mission to build bridges. Between The Hague and wider society. Between the city and the countryside. Between rich and poor. Between young and old. Between people with high and low education levels. Between people who see a challenge in every change and people for whom change is above all a source of concern. (Regeerakkoord 2012: 1)*

The present Coalition Agreement, it must be said, is more cautious:

*If people are falling behind, this is ultimately detrimental for the whole of society. [...] We are in favour of differences, but not oppositions. (Regeerakkoord 2017: 1-2)*

There are wide differences in income and education level: people with a high income or a higher education level have a better life situation than people with a low income or lower education. There are also differences between younger and older age groups; the former have a better life situation on average than the latter, though people aged 65 and over have been catching up, and their life situation has improved over the last decade. This improvement has happened mainly because their ownership of consumer goods (such as dishwashers and laptops) has increased and their housing situation has improved.

### Some improvement in resources, but no strong revival

The period 2008-2018 was a turbulent time economically, but once the economic crisis ended, Dutch gross domestic product (GDP) has been increasing again since 2013. The

Netherlands Institute for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) is forecasting further economic growth for 2019, though lower than in the two preceding years (CPB 2019). The effects of the economic recovery are partly reflected in people's personal resources (income, employment), but there has not been a strong revival and not everyone is benefiting to the same degree from the economic recovery.

Since 2013, most households have seen their purchasing power recover from the crisis; the poverty rate has been falling since that year and unemployment is now back to pre-crisis levels. There is no evidence of a strong revival, however. Despite the growth in GDP, real net disposable household income fell between 2008 and 2018 after correcting for household type and size. The economic growth has benefited businesses more than citizens. In addition, some groups are benefiting less from the economic recovery, such as single earners and benefit claimants, whose purchasing power has lagged behind. And although the poverty rate in most groups in society has declined (sharply in some groups), a fifth of non-Western migrants and over a quarter of benefit claimants are still living in poverty. Measures of income inequality moreover show that the generally stable level of inequality in the Netherlands has risen slightly since the crisis.

On the labour market, too, there are wide and stable differences between groups in society: the unemployment rate is consistently higher than average among young people (15-24 years), lower-educated people and non-Western migrants, although it did fall sharply during the period of economic recovery. The main increase in the net labour participation rate has occurred among older employees (45-64 years) and women (though these are still predominantly part-time jobs). Some small shifts have taken place in male and female working hours: men worked an average of one hour per week less in 2018 than in 2008, women one hour longer. Nonetheless, women still more often work part-time, and this is not leading to greater economic independence. Women consistently spend more time on unpaid work (looking after the household and others) than men.

As well as available financial resources, we also look at other individual resources, such as education and health. The rise in the education level continued further in the period 2008-2018 among both men and women – in fact women now generally leave the education system with better qualifications than men. The education level of Dutch citizens with a migration background is also rising, but children of second-generation migrants are still more often found in lower educational tracks. While premature school dropout has fallen sharply over the last decade, it is still most prevalent among young people with a migration background, and has recently shown signs of rising again.

One of the most objective measures of health available to us is life expectancy. Average life expectancy in the Netherlands increased between 2008 and 2018, and more so among men than women. However, the increase came to a halt in 2016. As people live longer, chronic illnesses are becoming more common, especially among women, who live longer on average than men.

## Few changes in different domains of daily life

The resources outlined above give an impression of people's ability to shape their daily lives. Logically, someone with a well-paid job and good health will be able to shape their lives differently from someone who finds it difficult to make ends meet or who struggles with impaired health. Below we describe developments and differences in housing conditions and social safety, and what people do in their leisure time and in the area of social and political participation.

The number of Dutch households grew faster than the total population between 2008 and 2018. A key driver here is the relatively strong growth in the share of single-person households, due among other things to the higher divorce rate, the rise in the number of single-parent families, the growth in the number of older people living alone, especially those aged 85 and over, and the increase in young people aged up to 30 living alone. This increased number of households, combined with the growth in the economy, is putting pressure on the housing market, as the supply of new homes is unable to keep up with the demand. It is striking that housing costs have remained fairly stable over the last three years, despite the economic recovery. There are, however, wide regional differences on the housing market, with demand for homes outstripping supply particularly in the Randstad region (the major conurbation incorporating the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht), as well as large tracts of the Province of Brabant and the region around Arnhem/Nijmegen. Buying or renting homes in these areas is also relatively expensive. The converse applies in the north of the country (excluding the city of Groningen), as well as in the Provinces of Zeeland and Limburg and in the Achterhoek region in the east. There are also differences between population groups: young people are leaving home later and also buying their own home later than ten years ago, while older people are continuing to live independently for longer. Young households (aged up to 35) relatively often end up in the private rented sector, because they earn too much to qualify for social rented housing or because the waiting lists are too long. Western migrants, too, who include many young labour migrants, increasingly live in privately rented homes. Young people pay a relatively high price for the same housing quality, because they often live in the more expensive private rented sector, but also because they more often live in (more expensive) cities. The relationship between price and quality turns out fairly well on average for older people, because they have often (largely) paid off their mortgage or have experienced modest and gradual rent increases if they live in rented housing.

Crime experienced by citizens and recorded by the police has fallen over the last decade. This relates to forms of crime which can affect citizens directly, such as crimes against property, vandalism, crimes of violence and cybercrime.<sup>2</sup> The share of victims of these kinds of crimes fell between 2007 and 2018. Young people (15-24 years), people with higher education and non-Western migrants are relatively often victims. The literature seeks explanations for these differences mainly in lifestyle and habits that are associated with population characteristics such as age, education level and degree of urbanisation; for

example, crime rates are higher in urban areas and young people generally spend more time in high-risk nightlife areas. There is no unambiguous explanation for the high share of reported victims among people with higher education.

The amount of leisure time and the way people spend it is fairly stable over time, and people's social lives have also changed relatively little over the last ten years in terms of the frequency of contact with family and friends. Digital communication resources are growing in popularity, and especially the smartphone, which accounts for a growing amount of time spent using media each day. New media and digital communication resources are also gaining ground in media use at the expense of traditional forms of media use (such as watching tv or listening to the radio at the time of broadcast). More than half the Dutch public play sport weekly and almost 90% of the population visit some form of artistic or cultural activity.

There are differences between different groups as regards leisure time and the way it is spent. For example, people aged over 65 lag behind the rest in terms of ownership and use of new media and also participate less in sport, though these differences are narrowing. Sports participation by Dutch natives still outstrips that by non-Western migrants, and the differences between people with low and high education are actually increasing due to a rise in participation in sport by people with higher education. On the cultural front, too, there are wide differences based on education level, with highly educated people attending and participating in cultural activities more than people with lower education.

Social and political participation was also predominantly stable in the period 2008-2018. The percentage of volunteers in the Netherlands remained largely unchanged over the period, as did political engagement and electoral participation. Membership of political parties increased, as did the level of political interest and the number of people inclined to join in or support protests. On the other hand, membership of organisations, especially trades unions, nature conservation organisations and church organisations, declined. Volunteers are found principally among churchgoers, people with higher education and older members of the population. Political engagement is highest among men, older people and the highly educated.

## 5.2 Subjective quality of life: satisfaction with life

There have thus been various developments in objective quality of life. In this section we look at subjective quality of life. How satisfied are the Dutch with their personal lives in general and in relation to the different resources and domains of life in particular? How satisfied are they with their income? Do they suffer stress or feel pressured because of education or work? How healthy do they feel? How satisfied are they with their housing situation and living environment? Do people feel safe? And how do people experience their leisure time and participation? Who feels lonely?

### General satisfaction with life remains high

Satisfaction with life is high, with an average score of 7.8 out of 10. It has remained unchanged over the last ten years. The Dutch were and are very satisfied with their personal lives in general; this satisfaction did not reduce during the economic crisis and is not increasing with the economic recovery.

As with objective life situation, we see that the stable average life satisfaction masks a number of stubborn differences: in this ssN we record an increase in both the share of people with low life satisfaction and the percentage with high life satisfaction.

Life satisfaction declined between 2008 and 2018 among young adults (18-34 years), single-parent families, people on middle incomes (20-80% of the disposable income distribution), people with lower education and people not in work. By contrast, satisfaction among single people increased.

### The Dutch are satisfied in many areas of life, but burn out and poor mental well-being are increasing

The Dutch are generally reasonably satisfied with the income of their own household; this satisfaction fell slightly during the crisis years. The differences in satisfaction between groups in the population, and how they have developed over time, correspond fairly closely with objective differences in income. Satisfaction with their income increased sharply among people with a non-Western background, though they are still significantly less satisfied than Dutch natives. The rise in income satisfaction has been more pronounced in the highest income group than the other income groups, despite the fact that the income gap itself did not widen. Viewed by education level, income satisfaction in the group with the lowest education declined slightly, and increased slightly in the intermediate group.

The share of employees who are satisfied or very satisfied with their working conditions is fairly constant at around 73%; satisfaction is slightly higher among self-employed workers. There was a clear increase in burnout complaints among employees between 2010 and 2018. Employees suffer from burnout almost twice as often as self-employed workers. Sectors with high burnout rates are not necessarily sectors where dissatisfaction is high. An example is education, where employees are relatively satisfied with their work, but where burnout rates are the highest.

It is not only teaching staff who experience pressure of work and stress; the pressure on pupils and students to achieve is also increasing. There was a sharp increase between 2009 and 2017 in the share of primary and secondary school pupils experiencing pressure at school. Almost half of them report that they are sometimes under pressure and almost a quarter feel stressed, with potential negative consequences for their mental well-being. General feelings of being under time pressure are fairly widespread. Four out of ten citizens aged 20-64 years sometimes feel stressed and around six out of ten sometimes feel they have too much to do. Young adults, people with a higher education level and people with a

higher income feel under greater pressure through the combination of paid and unpaid work and more often feel under time pressure than 35-64 year-olds, people with lower education and people with a lower income. Young adults with children living at home are more taken up with compulsory<sup>3</sup> activities than other people, and also more often feel under time pressure. This group, who are in the 'rush-hour of life' (the phase of life with children living at home), also have less leisure time on average and more often report that the amount of leisure time they do have is not sufficient. All this is in line with other research showing that parents are not only objectively under pressure, but also frequently feel that pressure (Roeters 2018). On the other hand, that same (and other) research suggests that this pressure does not always adversely impact satisfaction with life, because combining different roles and tasks can also be experienced as enriching (Rantanen et al. 2013).

Around eight in ten people were satisfied with their own health in 2018, but compared with 2008 the share of people across different population groups who feel they are in good health has declined. The share of people with low mental well-being increased between 2008 and 2018. This applies for many population groups, but especially for men, 18-34 year-olds and people with intermediate education. In 2018, the share of people with low mental well-being was highest among the lower-educated, people with a low income and non-Western migrants.

Loneliness is a topic that is receiving a good deal of policy attention (e.g. in the action programme 'One against loneliness' ('Eén tegen eenzaamheid') by the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport); this topic also features in this edition of SSN. In 2018, 35% of the Dutch population were moderately lonely and 9% very lonely, and these figures are reasonably stable over time. Policy and research devote a great deal of attention to loneliness among older people, particularly due to loss of a partner, friends and health (Van Campen et al. 2018). However, there are also differences based on education level and income: people with a low income and people with a lower education level are more often very lonely. There is also a relatively wide difference in life satisfaction between people who are lonely and those who are not: the latter are substantially more satisfied with life than the former. Of the determinants of life satisfaction studied here, only perceived control over one's own life makes a stronger contribution.

If we look at satisfaction with different areas of daily life, we find that the Dutch are generally very satisfied with their home, though that satisfaction has declined since 2009, especially among tenants. Perceived safety has improved: fewer and fewer people sometimes feel unsafe and the Dutch are generally satisfied with their living environment. The share of people who sometimes feel unsafe fell between 2008 and 2017. Women, young people, people with lower education and non-Western migrants are the main groups who sometimes feel afraid of becoming victims of crime.

People who participate in society, for example volunteering and taking part in collective actions for a national or international issue, are more satisfied with their lives. This is associated with higher satisfaction with democracy and more trust in themselves, in others and in the government.

### 5.3 Relationship between objective and subjective quality of life

As is usual in the SSN, in the last two sections we devoted extensive attention to objective and subjective quality of life. In this edition we have also explored the relationship between these two perspectives, in search of population groups and areas of life where objective and subjective quality of life coincide or diverge. As well as a large middle group who are not faring particularly well or badly either objectively or subjectively, there is also a small group who are doing not well both objectively and subjectively, as well as a small group who are prospering in both respects. Instances of discrepancy are rare.

#### Middle groups, laggards and leaders

Who is doing objectively and subjectively better – or worse – in the Netherlands? Although we initially saw an improvement in objective life situation followed by a deterioration, the position in 2018 was at the same level as in 2008. Life satisfaction neither increased nor decreased over the period as a whole, so that here too the situation in 2018 was the same as in 2008. However, this is not the case for all groups in the population. There are three striking divergences from the general trends. First, although the life situation of older people improved, their life satisfaction did not increase. Life satisfaction among people without work or those in the middle income group declined, whereas their life situation remained the same. And finally, the trends among the lower-educated moved in opposite directions: their life situation improved, but their life satisfaction declined.

If we relate life situation (objective) to life satisfaction (subjective), five groups emerge. The first is a large middle group accounting for 85% of the total, who are doing neither particularly well nor particularly badly either objectively or subjectively according to the classification used in this report.<sup>4</sup> The second group consists of people who are doing really well both objectively and subjectively (high score on objective life situation and high self-appointed score for life satisfaction); this group accounts for around 9% of the population. Then there is a group who are doing very badly both objectively and subjectively (low scores for objective life situation and subjective life satisfaction); this group accounts for 3% of the population. Dissatisfied people with a good objective life situation and satisfied people with a poor objective life situation are extremely rare; each group accounts for 1% of the population, and that figure is stable over the last ten years.

The group of people with good quality of life both objectively and subjectively is thus larger than the group who combine poor subjective and objective quality of life. These are people with relatively good access to resources and who feel they have lots of control over their lives.

At the other end of the spectrum, the group with really poor objective and subjective quality of life consists of people who generally have few resources and are pessimistic about their opportunities and capabilities. They do not feel they have control over their lives. They more often have a lower education level and more frequently suffer from a long-term illness or disorder. They are dissatisfied with society, but even more with their own lives – not surprising given their objective situation. This group resembles what has been described in an earlier SCP study as the ‘precariat’: a group who do not have resources, lack the means or skills to change this and sometimes turn their backs on society (Vrooman et al. 2014).<sup>5</sup>

Apart from general life satisfaction, we can also look at people’s satisfaction with different aspects of their lives: housing, circle of friends and acquaintances, residential setting, social position, financial resources and education. There is a group of around 10% who are dissatisfied with three or more of these six areas of life. This group have few resources, are pessimistic about their opportunities and capabilities and do not feel they are in control of their lives. They thus closely resemble the group described above in which a poor objective life situation is combined with dissatisfaction with life. The notable characteristic of this group is that they are relatively young.

In the areas of health, housing and safety, we find a number of groups where there is a discrepancy between subjective and objective life circumstances. Almost 70% of people with a disorder or disability nonetheless feel they are in good or very good health. On the housing market, it is common for people to be satisfied with their home despite its relatively low quality. This is the case among people with a low income, young people and residents in areas where there is great pressure on the housing market. In the area of safety, women and lower-educated people are more often afraid of becoming victims, but less often actually become victims (the type of crime to which they do fall victim does vary and may explain the fear of becoming a victim). These differences are explained mainly by factors specific to the area of life concerned and are less due to a discrepancy between objective life situation and subjective well-being in general.

In the older age categories, we see positive developments in a number of (objective and subjective) aspects of quality of life. The share of people aged over 65 who feel healthy has increased over the last decade, and unlike young people and young adults, their mental well-being has not declined. People aged over 75 live in normal homes in the community more often than in the past, even if they have physical disabilities. Older people generally feel safe, though are inclined to be critical of law enforcement. At the same time, they are among the groups who least often fall victim to crime.

#### 5.4 Satisfaction with and opinions on society

Thus far, we have looked at people’s personal life situation and at how satisfied the Dutch are with their life or parts of it (and the relationship between their objective and subjective

personal situation). In addition, the ssn explores opinions on aspects that are more concerned with society as a whole, such as the Dutch economy and politics, trust in institutions and opinions on social issues. That is the topic of this section, in which we outline a number of trends in these opinions and explore the relationship between people's personal lives and these views on society.

### Relatively positive sentiment, but also concerns and growing perception of oppositions

When asked whether the Netherlands is currently moving more in the right or wrong direction, more Dutch citizens said things were moving in the right direction in 2018 than in 2008. Data is also available for the first half of 2019 showing that, although public sentiment has waned a little, it is still more positive than ten years ago. The economic situation – the economy doing well, employment and purchasing power improving – is by far the most frequently cited reason for taking a positive view about the Netherlands in 2018. In 2008, and again between 2012 and 2014, the economic mood in the Netherlands was considerably more negative than in 2018. Satisfaction with the economic situation began to improve gradually from 2014 onwards. This improving trend had come to an end by the start of 2019, however, and the share of people who are satisfied with the economy is declining (cf also CBS 2019). This appears to be due mainly to concerns about falling purchasing power (see Dekker & Den Ridder 2019: 9).

This relatively positive public attitude does not, however, mean that people are optimistic about all aspects of society. Political trust remains weak, especially compared with trust in other institutions such as the police, justice system and business. More people than previously are satisfied with democracy and the government, but a substantial and stable section of the population are cynical about politics and feel, for example, that they have no influence over what the government does, or think that politicians pay too much heed to powerful groups rather than the general interest. There are also some social concerns: about society in general, about immigration and integration, about the costs of healthcare and about the quality of elderly care. Concerns about climate and the environment are also increasingly common. Finally, more Dutch people perceive conflicts and oppositions between different sections of the population than five years ago. The opposition between rich and poor is the most frequently cited example over the years. When people are asked where they see the greatest conflicts between groups, the difference between Dutch natives and people with a migration background comes top of the list.

### Weak relationship between personal situation and opinions on society

Public opinion on how the country and the political system is performing is related to the actual level of prosperity of the Netherlands. How individual Dutch citizens feel that society and the political system is performing can also be related to their personal situation, though the relationship is not a strong one. People's views on politics are based less on its contribution to their personal situation than on their opinions on how the economy is performing and on social issues.

In other words, people who are dissatisfied with (some aspects of) their own lives are not by definition dissatisfied with politics or society in general. Conversely, people who are dissatisfied with politics or society can perfectly well be satisfied with their own personal lives. A higher proportion of those who are dissatisfied with politics and society are not dissatisfied with any aspect of their personal lives than the share who are dissatisfied with one or more areas of their lives (40% and 22%, respectively). There is thus only a very partial overlap between social and political dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with one's own personal situation. People who are dissatisfied with their own situation also more often have a poorer objective life situation; they more often think they have been dealt fewer opportunities and feel they have less control over their lives. Compared with people who are dissatisfied with their personal situation, those who are dissatisfied with society have a higher education level and higher income, more often think they have been given opportunities and feel they have more control over their lives. However, they also more often say they do not intend to vote. Only a small part of their dissatisfaction with politics and society can be explained by their objective life circumstances or their perception of them.

## 5.5 Social issues for the near future

In the ssN we look back over the last ten years and map trends and developments over that period. In this section, we turn our attention to the near future. Which social issues can we identify which warrant attention from research and policy? We describe three such issues here.

### Growing uncertainty and concerns about the future

Personal quality of life (objective and subjective) is the product of a complex interplay of factors at the level of the individual and society (see the conceptual framework in chapter 1). Which social changes may have consequences for the quality of life of the Dutch? Changing or disappearing certainties, and concerns about society becoming more complex or more demanding, are examples of social trends which can have an impact on quality of life. The increasing prominence of technology, flexible employment relationships, globalisation, the drive for sustainability and the rapid flow of information mean that society can be perceived as complex and unpredictable, as was highlighted in the 2016 edition of the Social and Cultural Report (*Sociaal en Cultureel Rapport*) (Van den Broek et al. 2016). In part this uncertainty has to do with changes to the welfare state: for example, the uncertainty about whether there will be enough care available for people who require help for long periods of time, the uncertainties around flexiworking and temporary contracts in a changing labour market, uncertainty about whether pensions will be sufficient and whether people will reach retirement in good health, uncertainty about finding a suitable home, etc. Different groups of Dutch citizens face different uncertainties; for example, older people who are uncertain about the care they receive, lower-educated people who are uncertain about their chances of finding work, or people with a mild intellectual disability who have difficulty with the increasingly technological and flexible society. In the ssN we see that

young people and young adults also encounter more uncertainties in several areas and also more often suffer negative consequences from them, such as (choice) stress, burnout and mental health issues.

The increasingly complex society will demand more skills, self-reliance and control from people. Not everyone will be able to meet these demands, and this can lead to a growing group of citizens who are in danger of being left behind (see Van den Broek et al. 2016). It is important to be aware that a mix of objective disadvantage and perceived risks and uncertainties (and perceived control over one's own situation, for example) is at play here. Over the years, the ssn has consistently identified a group comprising around 3% of the population who are faring really badly both objectively and subjectively and made up of people who generally have few resources, feel they have little control over their lives and are pessimistic about their opportunities and capabilities. It is important to gain a greater understanding of the self-reliance of the group with fewer resources or skills, such as people with an intellectual disability or chronic disorder, as well as those with low literacy. How accessible is society now and in the future for different groups?

### Continuing inequality of opportunity in relation to quality of life

The differences in quality of life between the lower and higher-educated, between low and high income groups and between chronically ill and healthy persons have not reduced over the last ten years. The inequality of access to resources which determine quality of life has remained unchanged.

Inequality of opportunity is associated with (access to) social provisions, but also with individual differences and the skills which people possess and are able to use in order to develop their talents. Quality of life is a composite of life outcomes which refer to the societal position people achieve in a certain phase of life, as well as how they rate that position. This position is not a direct product of their opportunities, but also depends on other factors, such as whether someone sees opportunities and exploits them, serendipity (good and bad luck) and what people achieved earlier in their lives. Perceived control over one's life is also important for quality of life.

Finding a solution to stubborn differences in quality of life is therefore not simple, and reducing these differences will require input from government, through permanent investment in the availability and accessibility of resources, supporting and equipping people to utilise these resources and seeking to remove the uncertainties which people encounter.

### Growing perception of social oppositions and societal dissatisfaction

As this ssn shows (and as confirmed by the quarterly bulletins of the Citizens Outlook Barometer (*Continu onderzoek burgerperspectieven, COB*), the mood in the Netherlands is broadly optimistic, but people are also concerned about the way people in the Netherlands interact, about antisocial behaviour and about growing intolerance. There is also a growing share of the Dutch public who see social oppositions or even tensions or conflicts in society.

Is there objective evidence that society is becoming polarised? Trends in public opinion put some of these concerns into perspective, and broadly speaking do not show that opinions have moved further apart or come to be associated with negative images and emotions about people who hold different views (Dekker & Den Ridder 2019). This year's edition of the Social and Cultural Report (Beugelsdijk et al. 2019) also shows that there is much in the Netherlands which connects and unites people.

Despite the general optimism and the fact that society appears to be less polarised than sometimes suggested, it is a fact that perceptions of social oppositions are increasing and that people sense a growing dissonance. Social media – more than traditional media – are generally blamed for these oppositions (Dekker & Den Ridder 2019).

## 5.6 Conclusion

The general picture that emerges from this edition of Social State of the Netherlands is that objective and subjective quality of life in the Netherlands is generally high, including in a European perspective. The Netherlands is placed in the highest echelons in a number of international rankings of objective indicators, such as education level, income, labour participation, health and volunteering (see also Bijl et al. 2017; Wennekers et al. 2018). Compared with many European countries, the Dutch are socially active and politically engaged. The housing situation in the Netherlands is also relatively good, both objectively and subjectively: compared with other European countries, the Dutch live in large homes and are satisfied with them. The picture is also a positive one in an international perspective as regards subjective indicators, such as life satisfaction, but also in satisfaction with society. Levels of trust are relatively high, both in fellow citizens and in politics, institutions, the government and democracy.<sup>6</sup>

The Netherlands does lag behind other European countries in making the physical living environment more sustainable. The growth in the population and traffic volumes places heavy demands on physical space, nature and the environment. Despite policy efforts, attempts to create a greener energy system are not yet proving very successful; saving energy is enjoying only very limited success and the Netherlands lags a long way behind the rest of Europe in generating energy from renewable sources. Citizens are increasingly concerned about climate change and its consequences for the future, for example when it comes to ensuring a liveable environment for their children and grandchildren. The climate is mentioned more often in 2019 than previously as a societal problem, and the share of Dutch citizens who think that climate change is the result of human action is increasing significantly.

There are two further important caveats to the generally positive picture. First, there are wide and stubborn differences in the quality of life of different population groups. This picture changes little, and reflects a number of stubborn differences in quality of life, for example in relation to education or income, as well as between people with and without work or with and without disorders or illnesses.

In this edition of *ssn* we have specifically looked in more depth than in earlier editions at the correlation or discrepancy between objective and subjective quality of life. Generally speaking, there is little discrepancy: only very small sections of the population are doing well objectively but dissatisfied with their lives, or conversely, doing badly objectively but very satisfied with life. Another positive aspect is that the group who combine a good life situation with high life satisfaction is larger than the group who score badly on both aspects. This latter group, who lag behind on both objective and subjective quality of life, is, however, not shrinking. People who are dissatisfied with their own life, or some aspects of it, are generally also in a worse position objectively. Moreover, they often have no opportunity to improve their situation by themselves; they have little access to resources and do not feel they have control over their lives.

The second notable caveat is that there was no increase in average objective quality of life between 2008 and 2018, despite the economic recovery in recent years. Subjective quality of life (satisfaction with life) has also remained unchanged over the last ten years. The picture is thus stable on both dimensions. Does this lack of progress indicate regression? If we take the present Coalition Agreement as a starting point, the answer to this question is yes, given the stated goal: 'The Netherlands must not only show progress statistically; Dutch people must also feel that this is the case' (Regeerakkoord 2017: 1). As yet, the growing economy is not yet being translated into an improvement in quality of life, and people also do not feel that things are getting better.

## Notes

- 1 The Index contains data on eight key social domains: health (degree of impairment due to a disability or chronic disease); housing situation (including home size and type); social and public participation (volunteering, loneliness); participation in sport; living standards (ownership of consumer durables); mobility (car and public transport); sociocultural leisure activities (including cultural participation and hobbies); and holiday behaviour (see Boelhouwer 2010 for an extensive description of the Index).
- 2 Two data sources are compared for this purpose in the *ssn*, namely the victimisation rates reported by citizens in the Safety Monitor (*Veiligheidsmonitor*) published by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and police records. Given the hidden nature of the criminal world, the precise extent of total crime cannot be derived directly from these two sources (see also Chapter 10).
- 3 Compulsory activities are activities which need to be performed, or for which people are held responsible in some other way. Examples are paid work, study, looking after the household and caring for children.
- 4 The Life Situation Index was set at 100 in 2002, with a standard deviation of 15. We regard a good life situation as a score of 115 or more on the Index; a poor life situation is a score of 85 or less. Life satisfaction is defined as very high where people assign a score of 9 or 10 (out of 10), and poor if they score it 6 or lower. The substantive reasons for these choices are explained in more detail in chapter 12 of the report. The size of the groups described is of course dependent on the boundaries chosen.
- 5 This group accounted for 15% of the population, with disadvantaged positions on four types of capital. In this edition of *ssn* we combine a number of life outcomes, measured using life situation and life satisfaction. The combination with life satisfaction, in particular, gives rise to a much smaller group. Based on just the objective living conditions, the size of the group with low quality rises to 9%.

- 6 The fact that the Netherlands has been doing well internationally for many years is also linked to system characteristics (see Goderis 2015). Earlier research has for example shown that the effectiveness of the government – for example the quality of public services, the civil service apparatus and the formulation and implementation of policy – is a key factor in explaining differences in happiness between countries (Boelhouwer et al. 2015).

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