

## Contribution to Beyond GDP „Virtual Indicator Expo“

<http://www.beyond-gdp.eu>

Name of the indicator/method: **Canadian Index of Wellbeing**

There are many definitions of Wellbeing. The CIW has adopted the following as its working definition: The presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression focused on but not necessarily exclusive to: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture.



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[www.ciw.ca](http://www.ciw.ca)

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### Description

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) is a comprehensive composite index that tracks 64 indicators in eight areas of life in Canada: living standards, healthy populations, community vitality, education, time use, democratic engagement, leisure and culture, and the environment. These domains were chosen based on in-depth public consultations with Canadians about the things they value.

The vision of the CIW is to enable *all* Canadians to share in the highest wellbeing status by identifying, developing and publicizing statistical measures that offer clear, valid and regular reporting on progress toward wellbeing goals and outcomes Canadians seek as a nation.

As of April 2011, the CIW released the last in its series of eight domain reports, thus completing the development phase of the CIW. On October 20, 2011, the first full version of the CIW was released with data tracking a fifteen year period. For the first time in Canada, growth in the CIW is now being compared with growth in GDP to give us a more complete picture of whether Canada's overall wellbeing is keeping up, and if not, why. The CIW is a percentage change index that tracks each domain from the same 'baseline year' which is 1994. 1994 is assigned a value of 100. Movement upward from 100 in later years signals improvement in quality of life, while movement downward indicates a decline. The baseline year, 1994, was chosen as it was the first year of the National Population Health Survey.

The CIW is rather unique in that it is a citizen-driven rather than government-driven project. It began in 1999 when the Atkinson Charitable Foundation (ACF), in Toronto convened a group of index experts from across Canada, including Statistics Canada. They posed the following question: "What would it take to create a tool that truly measured Canadian wellbeing?" The general consensus was full support for the creation of an Index and a clear recognition that such a long-term initiative would require financial support for research, communication and publicity, and a management structure, which the ACF oversaw until the end of 2010. It had always been the vision of ACF to find a permanent, sustainable home for the CIW. In January 2011, the CIW moved to the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo. "Waterloo's Faculty of Applied Health Sciences has been an international leader for over 40 years in research related to promoting health and optimizing quality of life," explains CIW Advisory Board Chair, Roy Romanow. "They have a proven track record in delivering and translating research to drive behaviour and policy change. It is a natural fit."

## **Where to use the indicator**

The CIW will promote discussion about the types of policies, programs, and activities that can move us closer and faster toward achieving wellbeing. It will provide an accurate and transparent picture to Canadians as to how and where their wellbeing is changing and will empower them to hold governments accountable for their actions and decisions.

### **Profile on a First User of the CIW Framework**

Simcoe County, Ontario is a rapidly growing community of about 200,000 roughly an hour north of Toronto. A key concern is how to manage growth in a way that preserves and improves the values and quality of life in the community.

The Barrie Community Health Centre created the first local CIW group in Canada. They brought together a number of important organizations, including the county government, the United Way, the local community college, the public health unit, an environment network, and the school board. They call themselves The Resilience Collaborative. Their main goal is to reach out and engage large segments of the population who might not otherwise be involved in the decisions that shape their lives

Whenever the CIW produces a national report on a specific wellbeing category, the Collaborative holds an event or piggy-backs onto it a report that compares regional data to the national data and makes suggestions for local policy changes. So, for example, when the CIW released the Environmental Domain Report in April 2011, the Cooperative released its own report the same day.

This was followed up by the Chair of the Resilience Collaborative, Gary Machan, making presentations on the reports to local citizen groups. “At the end of the day what really matters is not so much the information, as much as it’s a case of what you do with it,” Machan said. “And it is here that the involvement of the civic sector becomes absolutely imperative. I try to tap into the specific areas that people feel passionate about in our community. In Simcoe there is a great deal of interest in building more sustainable food systems, hence, we are working with a variety of stakeholders in crafting local food procurement policies both at the municipal and institutional levels.”

The Barrie CHC also incorporated into their intake process a number of questions taken from the CIW wellbeing categories. They ask people about their income and education levels, access to friends and family, access to nutritious food and their time stress. Added Machan, “Not only does this provide us with a far better profile of who it is that uses our services, to which we in turn can be more responsive, but we are also finding that the very act of asking the questions performs a valuable educational function in terms of helping people connect the dots between their health and the determinants of health.”

## **Challenges and limitations**

The CIW will raise a number of important questions including:

- the completeness or incompleteness of current stocks of statistical time series,
- links in the form of causal interactions or mere correlations among the indicators housed in different silos,
- the collection of redundant indicators needlessly absorbing scarce resources,
- the failure to collect important data whose availability might reveal serious limitations and/or distortions of our understanding of the quality of our lives, and
- the consequences of making public policy on the basis of research relying on weak conceptual frameworks and/or incomplete data.

The CIW, in addition to providing annual updates, is now focusing on several areas: collaborating with Statistics Canada to address data challenges, embarking on the next phase of research to better understand the linkages between domains, ensuring members of parliament and policy experts understand how to use the CIW framework in their work, and building capacity to assist organizations interested in using the CIW framework.

## **Links to additional information**

[www.ciw.ca](http://www.ciw.ca)