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# How are Residents of Saskatchewan Really Doing?

## A Summary Report

A decorative image at the bottom of the page shows the silhouettes of two people walking on a hill against a bright, hazy background.

October 2019



# How are Residents of Saskatchewan Really Doing?

## A Summary Report

For the full report, visit [www.saskwellbeing.ca](http://www.saskwellbeing.ca)

Prepared for:  
Heritage Saskatchewan Alliance Inc.  
and Community Initiatives Fund



Community  
Initiatives Fund

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the two decades from 1994 to 2014, Saskatchewan has seen tremendous growth and economic prosperity, a trend that has diminished very little despite more recent economic challenges. Indeed, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita has steadily increased over the entire period. However, everyone has not necessarily shared in this prosperity, and increases in GDP, employment rates, and income do not tell the entire story. People's quality of life, their overall wellbeing, is based on much more than economic productivity. Wellbeing is also determined by the quality of our communities and the relationships we have there; by the opportunities for being with friends and families; by the availability of quality natural environments and opportunities for engaging in all types of leisure activities; by maintaining good physical and mental health; and by the degree to which we can balance our work, family, and community lives.

In addition, recent changes across Canada, and in Saskatchewan in particular, have introduced a number of new challenges. Some of the more prevalent challenges include increased incidence of drug use, especially opioids such as fentanyl; the still to be understood implications of the legalization of cannabis; more reports of suicide among young people; overt incidents of racism; and the rising impact of social media on populism and our democratic systems. These have all affected the way we see our lives and communities, and may have implications for our wellbeing.



Overall, wellbeing in Saskatchewan has risen by 13.2% since 1994, far exceeding the 9.5% progress experienced across Canada as a whole. However, progress in wellbeing in both the province and across the country fell well short of the growth in GDP per capita – in Saskatchewan, the economy grew by 44.1% and in Canada, by 38.0%. Within each of the domains, we have seen varying degrees of progress – with only Leisure and Culture failing to exceed 1994 levels. Briefly, here are the major trends:

### **Education (↑38.4%)**

More childcare spaces, but still inadequate; higher public school expenditures per student; higher graduation rates for high school and university, but tuition fees have increased significantly.

### **Living Standards (↑31.7%)**

Median family incomes are higher, fewer people are living in poverty, and food insecurity has decreased, but the income gap is increasing; higher employment and lower unemployment rates; housing affordability is becoming an issue.

### **Healthy Populations (↑14.8%)**

Declining percentages of people reporting better overall and mental health; more people with health or activity-based limitations and living with diabetes; but steep declines in teen smoking and higher rates of influenza immunization.

### **Democratic Engagement (↑14.3%)**

Higher voter turnout, especially among younger and Indigenous voters; more women elected to Parliament; but deteriorating confidence in the federal government and satisfaction with the way democracy is playing out.

### **Time Use (↑7.8%)**

Fewer people working long hours; more people with regular work hours and flexible schedules; longer commutes, less time with friends, and less sleep; but lower levels of time pressure.

### **Community Vitality (↑6.1%)**

Stronger feelings of belonging to the community, but fewer close friends; less volunteering, but more help being provided to those in need; crime severity has declined significantly – but has begun to creep back up in the most recent years – yet fewer people feel safe walking alone after dark.

### **Environment (↑3.1%)**

Soaring energy production and mineral extraction accompanied by higher greenhouse gas emissions and smog; more residents conserving at home, but still below national levels.

### **Leisure and Culture (↓10.7%)**

Less time socializing with others, but higher rates of physical activity; fewer hours committed to volunteering for culture and recreation organizations; shorter vacation trips and reduced spending of household income on culture and recreation opportunities.



Beyond these population-level trends, a consistent pattern emerged across all domains concerning inequity. The Indigenous populations in Saskatchewan are enjoying the benefits of progress in wellbeing to a much lesser degree than the non-Indigenous population, and the impact resulting from the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is still to be assessed for bringing about positive change. People living in more rural and remote regions of the province also are not benefitting to the same degree. In both cases, the major barrier to thriving is the lack of access to the resources and opportunities enjoyed by the non-Indigenous population and those living in the urban centres.

However, there are paths forward as we strive to write a new chapter for the people of Saskatchewan.

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**Heritage Saskatchewan** and the **Community Initiatives Fund** have partnered to develop the SIW based on a shared vision that all Saskatchewan citizens enjoy a high quality of life and wellbeing.





# What is Wellbeing

There are many definitions of wellbeing. The Canadian Index of Wellbeing 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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## Saskatchewan's definition of wellbeing:

"Wellbeing is achieved when people are physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy; economically secure; have a strong sense of identity, belonging and place; and have the confidence and capacity to engage as citizens."



# Why Canada Needs the Canadian Index of Wellbeing

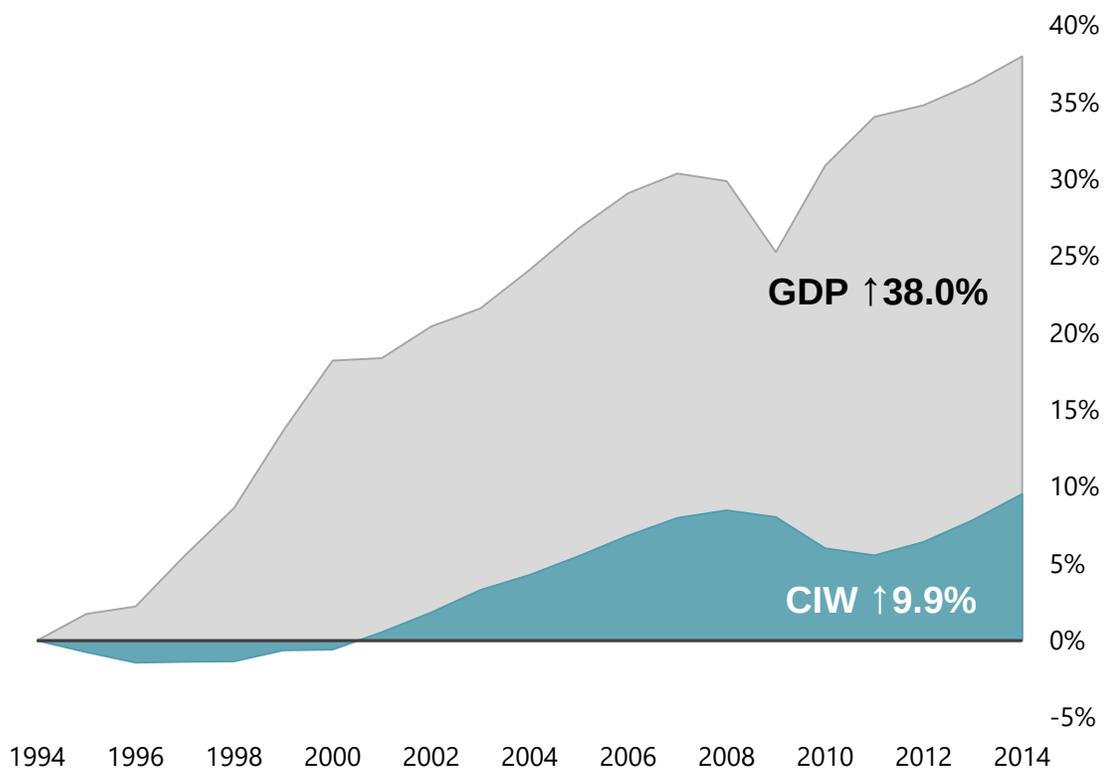
The United Nations and the OECD agree – the true measure of a country’s progress must include the wellbeing of its citizens. The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) shifts the focus from solely on the economy to include other critical domains of people’s lives.

Increasingly, citizens and their governments are thinking “beyond GDP” as a measure of our progress and quality of life. Even though Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is an important measure of our economic performance, it does not capture those areas of our lives that we care about most like education, health, the environment, and the relationships we have with others. GDP also is not sensitive to the costs of economic growth such as environmental degradation, loss of farmland, or growing income inequality.

In 1930, in an essay entitled “*Economic possibilities for our grandchildren*”, economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that in a century’s time, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would be four to eight times greater and by 2010 the average workweek would be 15 hours.<sup>1</sup> The great challenge would be to fill up people’s leisure time with meaningful activities.

While the first half of Keynes's prediction has come true, the corresponding quality of life improvement has never come close. As Figure 1 clearly indicates, GDP per capita in Canada has been rising much faster than wellbeing as measured by the CIW. In the 21-year period from 1994 to 2014, GDP grew by 38.0% while the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) rose by only 9.9% (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Up to the recession of 2008, GDP grew by 29.9% and the CIW by 8.8%. Since the recession, GDP, after faltering, has grown by another 8.1% whereas our wellbeing has grown by barely 1.1%. The gap between these measures reveals a deeper issue: GDP alone cannot measure how well our population is faring as a whole.

**Figure 1.** Trends in the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and GDP (per capita) from 1994 to 2014.



# Core Values and Domains Identified by Canadians

Since its inception and throughout the development of the CIW, the process has been designed to ensure everyday Canadians hear their own voices and see themselves reflected in the measure.

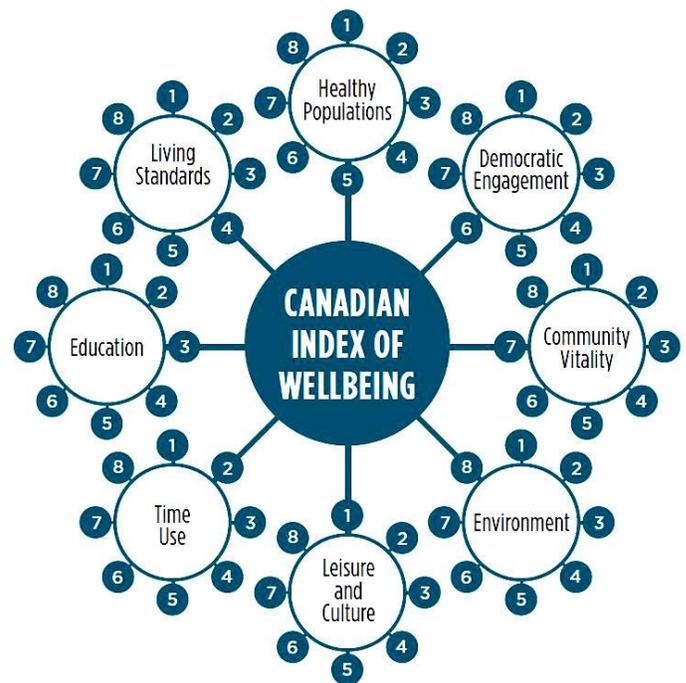
The CIW came about through the combined efforts of national leaders and organizations, community groups, research experts, indicator users, and importantly, the Canadian public. Through three rounds of public consultations, everyday Canadians across the country candidly expressed what really matters to their wellbeing. The process culminated in the identification of core Canadian values – including equity, diversity, sustainability, economic security – and eight domains of life that contribute to and affect the wellbeing of Canadians: *Community Vitality, Democratic Engagement, Education, Environment, Healthy Populations, Leisure and Culture, Living Standards, and Time Use* (see Figure 2). This framework shifts the focus solely from the economy to other factors that affect quality of life.

**Education** is the systematic instruction, schooling, or training given to the young in preparation for the work of life, and by extension, similar instruction or training obtained in adulthood.

**Living Standards** examines Canadians' average and median income and wealth; distribution of income and wealth including poverty rates, income fluctuations and volatility; and economic security, including the labour market, and housing and food security.

**Healthy Populations** considers the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of the population. It examines life expectancy, lifestyle and behaviours, and the circumstances that influence health such as access to health care.

**Figure 2.** The Canadian Index of Wellbeing Framework



**CIW Composite Index**

64 Indicators consolidated into a single CIW average

**8 Domains**

**8 Indicators** in each domain

**Democratic Engagement** means being involved in advancing democracy through political institutions, organizations, and activities.

**Time Use** considers how people experience and spend their time. It examines how the use of our time affects physical and mental wellbeing, individual and family wellbeing, and present and future wellbeing.

**Community Vitality** means vital communities that have strong, active, and inclusive relationships among people, private, public, and non-governmental organizations that foster individual and collective wellbeing.

**Environment** is the foundation upon which human societies are built and the source of our sustained wellbeing. On a broader level, environmental protection involves the prevention of waste and damage while revitalizing our ecosystems and working towards the sustainability of all our resources.

**Leisure and Culture** considers how participating in leisure and cultural activities, whether arts, culture, or recreation, contributes to our wellbeing as individuals, to our communities, and to society as a whole. The myriad of activities and opportunities we pursue and enjoy benefit our overall life satisfaction and quality of life.

Together, these eight domains provide a more complete picture of wellbeing, incorporating a comprehensive set of the key social, health, economic, and environmental factors contributing to overall quality of life. Teams of nationally and internationally renowned experts then identified eight valid, reliable, and relevant indicators within each domain that are directly related to wellbeing. By integrating the 64 indicators and eight domains and revealing their complex interconnections, the CIW composite index provides a comprehensive portrait of quality of life in Canada.

The CIW composite index tracks all indicators and domains of wellbeing to measure our progress over time, highlighting how we are doing – where we are doing well and where we could be doing better.

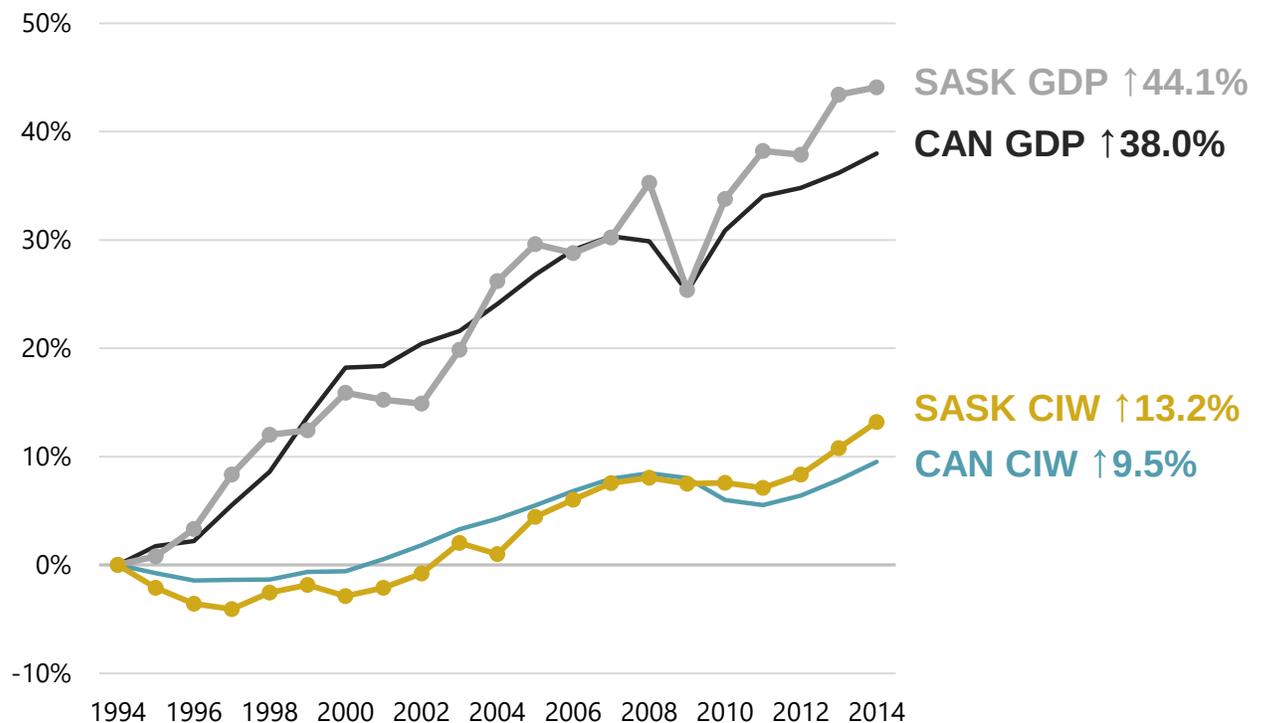
An ongoing cycle of public engagement, consultation, and refinement is one of the defining characteristics of the CIW. It ensures that the Index is rooted in Canadian values, grounded in community experience, shaped by technical expertise, and responsive to emerging knowledge. The CIW is not a static measure. As new issues emerge and new knowledge, understandings, and data become available, the CIW adapts to strengthen its measure of wellbeing without veering from the values on which it is grounded. Hence, validating and continually improving the CIW is an ongoing process.

# Wellbeing in Saskatchewan

Consistent with trends in Canada overall, wellbeing in Saskatchewan has lagged far behind growth in its GDP. Since 1994, wellbeing in Saskatchewan has increased by 13.2% – significantly better than the progress made for Canada overall (9.5%)<sup>a</sup> – but compared to 44.1% growth in provincial GDP (per capita), the increase in wellbeing pales by comparison. And the gap continues to grow.

Economic productivity in Saskatchewan continued to grow from 1994 to 2014 in spite of a temporary set-back due to the recession of 2008. In contrast, wellbeing in Saskatchewan, as measured by the CIW, has never progressed to the same extent. Even though wellbeing in the province has been recovering since the recession, the gap between it and GDP in 2014 is greater than at any other point in the 21-year period examined here. Indeed, the gap has risen to 30.9%, which is even greater than the gap in Canada overall that rose to 28.5% in the same period.

**Figure 3.** Trends in the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and GDP (per capita) from 1994 to 2014.



<sup>a</sup> The CIW for Canada overall has been adjusted by removing the indicator for Ecological Footprint in the Environment domain, which is not available for Saskatchewan. Doing so allows for direct comparison of the Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing to the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.



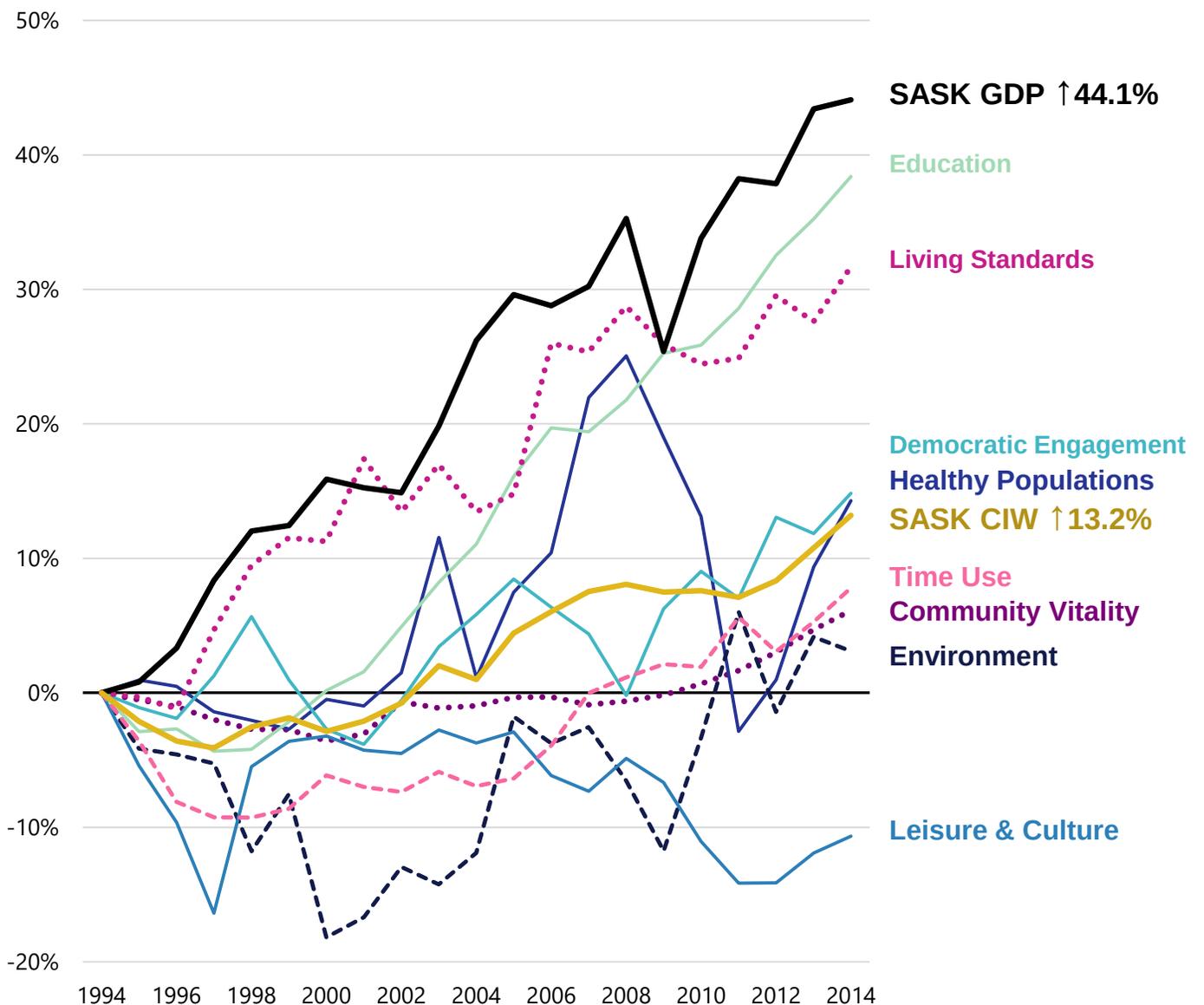
## The Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing

In keeping with the CIW's mission, the Saskatchewan index report focuses on the question: "how is Saskatchewan doing and how has wellbeing changed over time?" both overall and within each domain of wellbeing. It further draws comparisons to trends in wellbeing for Canada overall. To answer this question, the report draws on data collected from 1994 to 2014 for the CIW's national report of 2016, and describes how the wellbeing for residents of Saskatchewan has shifted over that time.

Saskatchewan and Canada have shown very similar increases in overall wellbeing since 1994, with Saskatchewan making greater progress since 2011. The modest gains in wellbeing over 21 years came about due to changes in quite different domains. For example, Saskatchewan shows very similar trends and progress to Canada overall in Democratic Engagement, Education, and Healthy Populations. The trends are similar for Leisure and Culture, but rather than progress there has been a decline in this domain for both the province and the country. After lagging behind Canada up until 2008, Saskatchewan showed greater progress in Time Use. The only domain in which Saskatchewan lags significantly behind Canada is in Community Vitality.

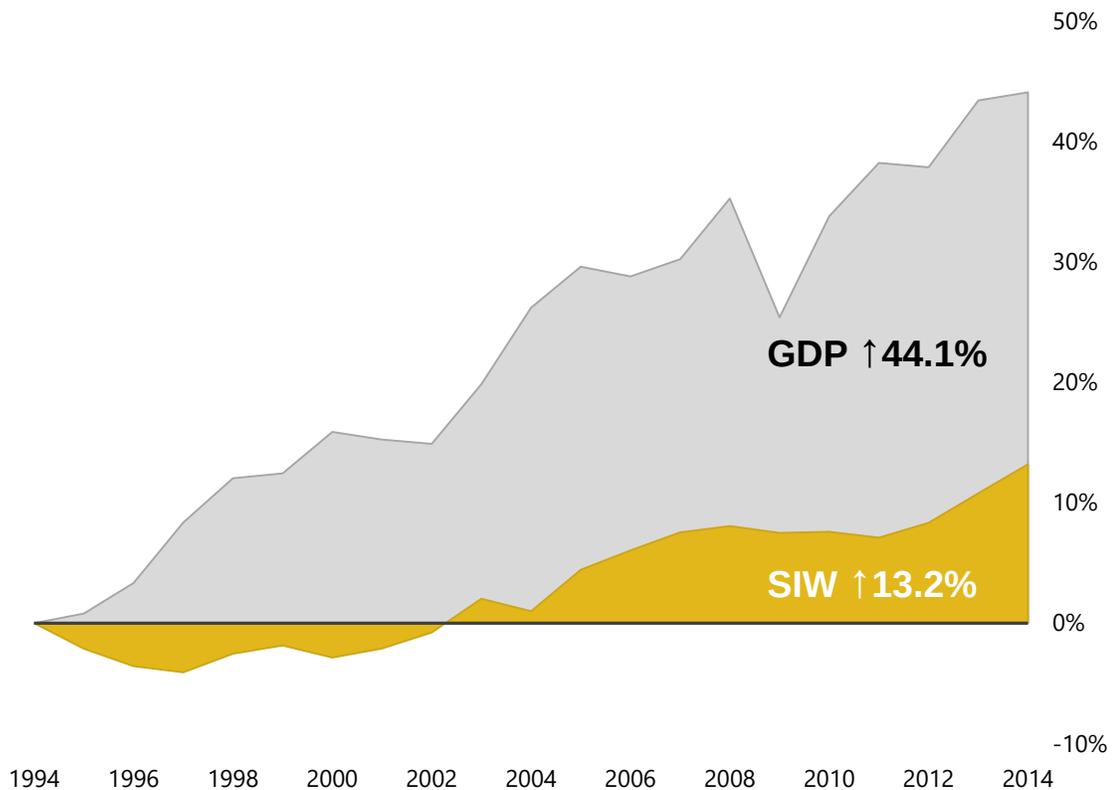
The recession of 2008 appears to have had an effect on some domains and not others. We see dramatic declines in Democratic Engagement and Leisure and Culture immediately following the recession, with only Democratic Engagement showing signs of recovery to pre-recession levels. The recession appears to have had little effect in Saskatchewan on progress being made in Education, Healthy Populations, Time Use, and especially in Living Standards, which continues to make advances since the economic downturn. Elsewhere in Canada, Living Standards fell dramatically following the recession and had yet to recover by 2014.

**Figure 4.** Trends in the Canadian Index of Wellbeing for Saskatchewan with eight domains and compared with GDP (per capita) from 1994 to 2014.



While positive changes in the economy, as reflected in GDP per capita, were much more consistent in both Canada and Saskatchewan, the more widely varying trends in the domains of the CIW indicate that wellbeing in Saskatchewan has been subject to other forces. Of course, each of these domains also tells its own complex story. Even modest improvements in overall wellbeing do not necessarily result in positive trends in all domains or their indicators. The following pages provide a summary of the trends which are explored in further detail in the full report *How are Residents of Saskatchewan Really Doing? A Report by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing*.

**Figure 5.** Trends in the Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing and GDP (per capita) from 1994 to 2014.





## Writing a new chapter ... together

The story in Saskatchewan over the two decades from 1994 to 2014 has been one of growth and economic prosperity for a great many people. Even with the more recent economic challenges, if we relied only on GDP, employment rates, and income – the usual cast of characters – we might believe we had told the entire story. But below the surface, something is troubling people in Saskatchewan. Despite record high GDP, high employment, great employment quality, and lower poverty rates, the people do not necessarily feel better off. Increased wealth has not translated into higher overall wellbeing.

When people go to bed at night, many still worry about being able to afford the cost of food and shelter, or whether they can manage escalating tuition fees for their children. They worry about their health. They wish they were able to spend more time with their kids, to be with their friends, or to volunteer more in the community. They feel less safe even though crime rates have dropped in the province. And they wonder if government will act on their behalf.



To change this narrative and write a new chapter, Saskatchewan needs to put wellbeing – in all its dimensions – at the heart of decision-making and policy development. By adopting the framework and approach of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) and creating the Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing (SIW), the province can now measure what truly matters most to the people. It can consider wellbeing alongside economic growth and monitor if we are making progress towards higher quality of life. It can use a common language and framework to consider how many indicators of wellbeing intersect and influence one another and see how improvements in one area can generate improvements across many domains.

Not only does the Index offer a high-level view of how Saskatchewan is really doing, it explores strengths and challenges within each domain. It invites people to understand trends, to take stock of where they are now and to imagine where they want to be in the future. Perhaps even more importantly, it sparks new questions, fosters serious conversations, and prompts new collaborations. Evidence of this process was demonstrated when several individuals from across Saskatchewan with expertise in one or more of the eight domains were invited to a workshop in April 2018. They were asked to reflect on trends for all indicators comprising the domains of wellbeing – not only in their own area of expertise, but in all domains — to identify where gaps existed in the data that were relevant to the Saskatchewan experience and make connections among domains to better understand wellbeing within the province.

A central theme that emerged from the discussions was inequity, especially for specific groups within the province – for Indigenous peoples both on and off reserve, for people living in more rural areas of the province or simply outside the major urban centres, and for new Canadians. Inequity was considered not only as an issue concerning income, but also in terms of access to health services, access to community resources and opportunities for leisure and culture, and for education. Many of their reflections and suggestions have been woven into this next chapter.

# Building on strengths

As the results in the report show, Saskatchewan can point to strengths in each domain. Education and Living Standards are particularly strong and position the province well for the future. A resurgence in the Democratic Engagement, Healthy Populations, and Time Use domains is also encouraging and show that people in Saskatchewan are reclaiming the time, activities, and relationships that matter most to them. Further, the province has a long tradition of people helping one another and of tight knit communities, characteristics which are reflected in Community Vitality.

## Strength in Education positions Saskatchewan well for an uncertain future

Across Saskatchewan, lifelong educational opportunities are seen as vital not only for individual wellbeing, but as a driver for healthy living; engagement in democracy; participation in leisure, culture, and community; care for the environment; and ultimately, higher living standards. Educational achievement of parents often translates into higher educational attainment for their children and can boost wellbeing for generations. For a province with a higher proportion of young people, sustaining progress in education for the entire family will create greater access to opportunity in all aspects of community life.

Similarly, the foundation for educational attainment, better health, physical, social, and emotional competencies, and future participation in the labour force is laid at an early age. To that end, in 2014, the province boosted spending for early childhood education by \$44.6 million, and in 2016, released its *Early Years Plan 2016 to 2020*, which outlines goals to improve prenatal and early childhood support for mothers and children; to provide better access to high quality early learning and childcare options; to support families in their role as parents and caregivers; and to align programs and services at provincial and community levels.<sup>3</sup> Along with the tripling of the percentage of kids with access to registered centre-based childcare from 1994 to 2014, the province has made an excellent start. Despite the progress; however, only 1 child in 8 had access to regulated childcare in 2014, which is about half the national average.

Nevertheless, through strategic initiatives and increased spending, the province clearly is focused on improving access to regulated childcare spaces, and should maintain this focus. According to the World Health Organization:

Economists now argue on the basis of the available evidence that investment in early childhood is the most powerful investment a country can make, with returns over the life course many times the amount of the original investment. (p. 5)<sup>4</sup>

With 9 in 10 young adults completing high school (90.4%) and university graduation rates doubling over 20 years (up to 24.4% in 2014), there is cause for celebration. The next step is to close the gap between graduation rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and to ensure these rates are achieved uniformly across the province. More Indigenous students than ever are completing high school and obtaining university degrees, but they still trail non-Indigenous students. In 2011, 13.0% of off-reserve First Nations people and 10.7% Métis people held a university certificate, diploma, or degree at a bachelor level or more – less than half the rate for the non-Indigenous population – and the number dropped to 4.5% for on-reserve First Nations people.<sup>b</sup> Overall, 9.5% of the Aboriginal identity population had a university degree, compared to 21.1% for non-Indigenous respondents that year.<sup>5</sup> Regionally, in half of the census subdivisions across Saskatchewan, the number of people 20 to 24 years of age that do not have high school or any other certification or diploma is over 20% – well above the provincial average. In Northern Saskatchewan, that rate is 57%.<sup>6</sup>

However, an important opportunity exists in Saskatchewan for apprenticeships and trade certificates where attainment is more equal between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth. Resource-rich provinces like Alberta and Saskatchewan have the highest proportions of men aged 25 to 64 years with an apprenticeship certificate in the skilled trades, and because they are in demand, they often earn more than men with a bachelor's degree.<sup>7</sup>

## Leveraging remarkable growth in Living Standards

Undisputedly, the Living Standards domain soared in the province between 1994 and 2014. While the rest of Canada struggled to regain its footing after the 2008 recession, Saskatchewan seemed relatively unscathed. During this period, average after-tax median family incomes rose by \$28,000; the percentage of people living in poverty dropped by more than half; employment rates and employment quality rose well above the national average; and long-term unemployment rates fell by half. By 2014, progress in the Living Standards domain was three times the national level, despite increasing inequality and serious issues of food and shelter affordability.

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<sup>b</sup> Note: in every instance throughout the report where reference is made to “Aboriginal peoples”, “First Nations”, Métis”, and “Inuit”, we have used wording drawn directly from a national report, usually produced by Statistics Canada, which is cited in the Endnotes.



Progress can be, and has been, made in alleviating poverty in Saskatchewan. With the release of Saskatchewan's Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2016, which set a target of reducing the number of people in Saskatchewan experiencing poverty for two or more years by 50% by the end of 2025, efforts are in place to ensure the poverty rate continues to fall. Like the CIW, the Strategy recognizes how the domains of wellbeing are interconnected and that reducing poverty helps not only the Living Standards of people, but will improve aspects across several domains. For example, reducing poverty helps create better access to childcare and life-long education; to better employment; to health services and more nutritious foods; and to many different opportunities and people within their communities.<sup>8</sup> The Saskatchewan Strategy is now complemented by *Canada's First National Poverty Reduction Strategy*,<sup>9</sup> which shares a similar perspective that poverty is not simply a function of low income, but is the outcome of the contribution of many different aspects of life. The National Strategy has set targets to reduce poverty by 20% by 2020 and by 50% by 2030 using the Market Basket Measure (MBM) as its official benchmarking measure, and includes a broad array of indicators to monitor meaningful dimensions of life that are related to poverty and inclusion. Both the provincial and national Strategies emphasize the importance of addressing poverty for Indigenous peoples, who experience it at far greater rates than non-Indigenous people.

Finally, Living Standards indicators in Saskatchewan – and in any resource-based economy – are subject to fluctuation as the economy shifts in response to global pressures. In this report, trends are described for the period from 1994 to 2014, and therefore do not include the more recent resource price contraction and its impact. However, vulnerability to market shifts was present throughout the 21-year period under examination and the province consistently emerged from its down years. The final result was spectacular overall progress in Living Standards, especially since 2005, and there is no reason to believe the trend will reverse itself despite recent challenges.



## Re-engaging with democracy

Indications are that people in Saskatchewan – especially the young and Indigenous peoples – are re-engaging with democracy. Voter turnout for federal elections is up, the gap between the percentage of younger and older voters is down, and they have elected more women to Parliament. This re-engagement might have been in part stimulated by fewer people being satisfied with the way in which democracy was working and lower levels of confidence in the federal government – two downward trends that preceded people’s greater involvement. Hopefully, these trends will translate into more civic engagement as participation in political and advocacy groups remains very low with only about 2% of the population being involved. Should increased participation in democratic activities result, it would be not just at the federal level, but play out more locally as well.<sup>10</sup>

Sending more women to Parliament is one way in which people can see themselves better represented in government. Ensuring greater representation also means increasing the diversity of that representation. Along with monitoring the number of women serving in Parliament – as well as in the provincial legislature and local councils – people in Saskatchewan would benefit from seeing the number of elected individuals that are Indigenous peoples, ethnically diverse, and younger, increase. Seeing governments at all levels that better reflect the profile of the people can increase feelings of being effectively represented and raise levels of confidence in the democratic process.

# Tackling challenges

Along with some of the troubling trends described in the report, the provincial experts who participated in the workshop identified a number of other issues and challenges – as well as some possible paths forward – that Saskatchewan must confront. They recognized that positioning Saskatchewan for a future to which we can aspire requires a clear-eyed look at the challenges the province faces.

As noted earlier, the principal theme emerging from these discussions was **inequity** – inequities faced by Indigenous peoples in particular, by people living in more rural and remote regions of the province, and by new Canadians. And inequities are compounded when people share more than one of these characteristics. While many of the challenges identified *within* the domains are regional disparities and inequalities in access, they are also challenges that cut across all domains. Workshop participants recognized these challenges and provided insights into opportunities for improvement as well as current gaps in knowledge.

What follows is a brief summary of the main points raised by the workshop participants, along with some reflections on how the province might move forward. These suggestions include both strategic directions as well as thoughts on other measures that could serve to gain deeper insights into the challenges and inequities being faced. They also implicitly reveal the important interconnections among the domains of wellbeing.

## Ongoing challenge of accessible and affordable shelter

Food and shelter are our most basic needs. If they are not met, no one can expect to flourish at school, at work, or in the community. While progress has been made on food security in the province, meeting housing needs continues to be a challenge. Paradoxically, when interest rates are low and incomes are higher, access to housing is better, but ongoing fluctuations in the market brings uncertainty.

Even though the Government of Saskatchewan put forth its vision on housing in 2011, workshop participants felt there is still a need to move forward on the five strategic directions outlined in its Housing Strategy:<sup>11</sup>

- increase the housing supply;
- improve housing affordability;
- support individuals and families in greatest housing need;
- enhance strategic planning for housing; and
- collaborate, communicate, and educate.

By making progress on these directions, families in Saskatchewan needing housing would be less subject to the impact of rising interest rates, rising unemployment, and higher debt load.

## How might personal debt be impeding progress in wellbeing?

An area of concern for many of the workshop participants was the amount of debt being carried by people. Certainly, the amount of debt has increased for Canadian families over the years, and those who saw their debt increase the fastest were people between the ages of 35 and 44 years, couples with children under 18 years of age, and families carrying mortgages. By 2012 in fact, over a third of Canadian families (35%) had a debt-to-income ratio of 2.0, which means that their debt was at twice the amount of their after-tax incomes.<sup>12</sup> The percentage of families with this amount of debt increased from 23% in 1999, and recent evidence suggests that the percentage is closing in on 50% of families.

Personal debt is an indicator that could be added for regular monitoring within the Living Standards domain. Including it would shed light not only on how much debt families in Saskatchewan have, but how the debt is incurred (i.e., whether from assets or liabilities such as loans for education or credit card debt), which would assist in identifying solutions to help alleviate the stresses associated with carrying large debt. Alleviating that stress is seen as a key strategy that would also contribute to improved overall and mental health, reduced incidence of poverty, and a narrowed gap in social status, especially among Indigenous peoples.

## Troubling signs for physical and mental health

A higher percentage of people in Saskatchewan than in Canada overall have lower ratings of mental health and of overall health, although there has been an upswing in recent years. While life expectancy is increasing, it is doing so at a slower rate than the rest of the country. They are experiencing higher rates of the incidence of diabetes, more people are living with health or activity-based limitations, and fewer people have access to a regular family physician. In virtually every instance, these trends are much more severe for Indigenous peoples and for those living in more rural and remote areas of the province. Equity of access to adequate health care represents the greatest challenge.

The consensus held widely by the workshop participants was that reducing health inequities was the key to improving the overall health of Saskatchewan residents and to enhance their wellbeing. The means to do so was for the development of public policy and programs that are tailored to those groups most often excluded by virtue of limited access. The World Health Organization similarly concluded that the most effective actions are through social justice initiatives and equity-oriented measures, such as rectifying the social and situational circumstances in which people are living.<sup>13</sup>

The population-level data presented in the report provide a valid, high-level picture of health challenges and areas of progress in Saskatchewan, but we need to remember that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in the province are either absent or under-represented in most of the data sources. Indigenous peoples across Canada, and especially in Saskatchewan, have lower life-expectancies and often experience much worse health outcomes than the non-Indigenous population. Quite often, the situation is much worse on-reserve. According to the National Collaborating Centre on Aboriginal Health:

These health issues include high infant and young child mortality; high maternal morbidity and mortality; heavy infectious disease burdens; malnutrition and stunted growth; shortened life expectancy; diseases and death associated with cigarette smoking; social problems, illnesses and deaths linked to misuse of alcohol and other drugs; accidents, poisonings, interpersonal violence, homicide and suicide; obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular, and chronic renal disease (lifestyle diseases); and diseases caused by environmental contamination ... (p. 4)<sup>14</sup>

### Shifting the gaze towards children and youth

Many of the trends across domains have implications for the wellbeing of the province's children and youth. The circumstances within which they live and the characteristic beliefs and behaviours of their parents are extremely influential on the wellbeing outcomes and experiences of the youngest people in Saskatchewan. Consequently, the workshop participants advocated for greater reflection and subsequent action that would raise the wellbeing of children and youth, both in terms of what families are facing, but importantly, what our youngest people are facing.

In responding to some of the trends in the province, creating greater access to affordable childcare has implications not only for children's early development and future opportunities, but it also enhances opportunities for parents, especially women. Relatedly, understanding the factors that are preventing parents from spending more quality time interacting with their children would help to identify what changes could be introduced so families have more opportunity to spend time together. Also, not only do people report spending less time socializing with friends, they also are spending less time with family.

Another area that the workshop participants felt could have greater attention was crime and safety among youth. The Crime Severity Index reports rates of serious crime among the adult population, but Statistics Canada also produces a youth-focused crime severity index, which allows for the monitoring of trends specific to Saskatchewan's youth. Other federal agencies report on these trends for Canada and its provinces and territories, and a stark characteristic of their findings is the higher rates of youth crime in Saskatchewan, especially among Indigenous youth.<sup>15</sup> An unanswered question concerns the degree to which these rates are related to emerging concerns about gang activity across the province. Meeting the challenges associated with youth crime head-on would enhance wellbeing for everyone and their communities because the issue is less about the crimes themselves and more about the typically marginalized youth who are implicated.

### Losing our leisure and the role of technology

Leisure and Culture was the only domain that failed to make progress over the 21-year period, yet it is the domain that arguably makes the most significant contribution to people's health and wellbeing. It enriches our lives and provides us with opportunities to flourish. People in Saskatchewan are spending less time socializing with friends, committing fewer hours to volunteering for recreation and culture organizations, spending fewer days away on vacation, and protecting less of their household income for culture and recreation opportunities. These losses masked the increases in physical activity and modest returns to the performing arts, and contributed to downturns in overall volunteering activity, participation in civic engagement, and the number of close friends on whom people could rely.

Several questions arose at the workshop concerning the role that technology might be playing during our leisure time. For example, to what extent does increased screen-time – on social media, streaming movies, and online gaming – interfere with our ability or even desire to connect directly with others? Has cultural and leisure-related consumption shifted to online experiences as opposed to “real-life” experiences, especially with others? More positively, how has or could technology create greater access to needed resources in support of mental health, participating in democratic practices, or broadening our communities of interest? Ultimately, the questions still remain unanswered, but represent an intriguing area of exploration for the ways in which technology affects our wellbeing.

# Charting a course for a prosperous future

Regardless of what government plans and policies are developed, what community initiatives and strategies are implemented, or what people choose to do, the best decisions arise from the availability and accessibility of valid and reliable data. Having evidence that speaks directly to those things that most affect our wellbeing places us in a far better position to think and respond innovatively.

## Collecting more and better data

In order to identify trends over time and to compare results, indicators of wellbeing have to be available consistently, nationally, provincially, and ideally, at lower levels of geography to capture local contexts. Further, data sources such as Statistics Canada need to more fully include First Nations, Métis and Inuit people – on and off-reserve – to ensure the unique challenges faced by these groups are understood and integrated into innovative solutions.

There are, however, several challenges to collecting and accessing the needed data. Among the most critical challenges to acquiring high quality data are the following:

### Validity of the data

Does the indicator taken from the data source measure what we need to know? Many data sources are not sufficiently specific to the issue or challenge that we wish to address.

### Reliability of the data

Are the data gathered consistently over time? In order to monitor progress over time and make valid comparisons, the indicators we select must be measured in the same way at every time period. Understandably, as priorities change, so too do the data sources, but this compromises the ability to track progress.

### Scalability of the data

Do the data provide valid and reliable indicators at different levels of geography to allow comparison over time among different jurisdictions, from the national down to the local? While some data sources, such as economic and Census data, do meet this challenge, we are sorely lacking in social, health, and environmental data sources at different levels of geography.

### Specificity of the data

Do the data include information on different sub-populations of interest and provide the ability to describe these groups by key indicators of wellbeing? For example, does the data source include information on Indigenous peoples, rural versus urban residents, or new Canadians, and allow for distinguishing between them and other groups on selected indicators?



Specifically in the context of Saskatchewan, not only must these challenges be overcome, but as noted, the data need to reflect the realities of the people of the province, and in particular, Indigenous peoples, people living in rural and remote regions, and new Canadians. Further, some national-level data sources might not provide the best and most relevant indicators for the priorities of the Saskatchewan experience. For example, while some indicators might be available that suit other provinces – fish stocks in the Atlantic Provinces – they might not be the most revealing indicators for Saskatchewan. So, the closer we are to acquiring the necessary data, the closer we are to making significant changes to the wellbeing of the province’s residents.

### Aligning the wellbeing agenda with reconciliation

Given the many references to the importance of considering the circumstances and experiences of Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan as we strive to enhance wellbeing for all, it is encouraging to see such great alignment between the conceptual framework of the CIW, its adoption in the SIW, and the calls to action made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, the intent is not to consider how Indigenous peoples fit into the CIW framework; rather, the intent is to consider how the framework adopted by the SIW can serve the Reconciliation process.

If we regard the wellbeing framework as a parallel process, we can consider it as complementary to Reconciliation and hopefully help serve its vision. In particular, there are shared concerns in similar domains of life, such as education, health, living standards, and leisure and culture. Indeed, the calls to action put forth by the Commission provide tremendous guidance to both the CIW and the SIW in understanding what and how wellbeing would look like for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of Saskatchewan and Canada. To that end, workshop participants emphasized the need for a more collaborative and consultative process in meeting the challenges of achieving wellbeing for all.



## Some final reflections from the workshop of provincial experts

The expert participants in the workshop made a number of other observations concerning how the SIW can shift conversations and lead to better outcomes.

- There was broad consensus that both the wellbeing framework and the data are valuable for informing our understanding of wellbeing in the province. There was also an appetite for even more data in strategic areas, as noted above.
- The process has highlighted the interconnections among domains. Greater recognition emerged about how changes in people's circumstances do not occur in a vacuum; rather they play out in a myriad of ways across different domains of wellbeing.
- As noted earlier, there is a desire to dig deeper – to look at geographic differences within the province, to examine differences among groups of interest.
- The results reinforced the view that collaborative approaches to finding solutions, looking across domains and sectors, would be more successful. The process encourages many different stakeholders – academics, community leaders, businesses, and governments – to get on board and collectively work towards positive change.
- Need to emphasize that this is a starting point. The report organizes data in a model of wellbeing in such a way that has not been done before. It begins the shift from one's own frame of reference towards a more holistic frame, and explores the big stories behind the results.

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