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Beyond the Disruption: Medium- and Long-Term Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Well-Being

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1 Introduction

Societal crises profoundly reshape daily routines and affect key societal subsystems such as the educational system or the labor market. The COVID-19 pandemic is a prominent example: it brought large-scale disruptions across multiple domains of life. Among other outcomes, the pandemic had substantial implications for individuals' subjective well-being.

From the outset of the pandemic, research has investigated how COVID-19 affected individuals' subjective well-being, a term generally understood as a person's cognitive and affective evaluation of his or her life (Diener et al., 2018). Studies have examined the cognitive dimension through measures such as life satisfaction (e.g., Bähr et al., 2022; Handschuh et al., 2024; Patzina et al., 2025b) and job satisfaction (e.g., Nemteanu et al., 2021), and the affective dimension through mental health outcomes such as depression (e.g., Daly & Robinson, 2021; Patzina et al., 2025a) and happiness (e.g., Liu & Hsieh, 2024; Lepinteur et al., 2022).

While some studies reported mixed results depending on context and country (e.g., Prati & Mancini, 2021), the majority of early empirical findings point to a significant short-term decline in well-being during the first year of the pandemic (e.g., Bähr et al., 2022; Easterlin & O'Connor, 2023; Entringer, 2020; Delhey et al., 2023; Hettich et al., 2022). Long-term studies are scarce. However, the available empirical evidence suggests that the early negative impact of the pandemic was often modest and tended to diminish over time (e.g., Delhey et al., 2023; Zacher & Rudolph, 2024; Ahlheim et al., 2022; Kung et al., 2023). In addition, research indicates that socially disadvantaged and resource-poor families were particularly impacted by the unintended consequences of homeschooling, which affected both parents' and children's overall well-being (e.g., Laurence & Smyth, 2026; Heers & Lipps, 2022; Huebener et al., 2021; Neugebauer et al., 2024; Sandner et al., 2023). Similarly, the challenge of balancing family

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and work demands during lockdowns was associated with declines in women's well-being (e.g., Graham et al., 2021; Zoch et al., 2021). Overall, the literature documents predominantly negative, short-term, and socially stratified effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on subjective well-being (e.g., Mata et al., 2021; Möhring et al., 2021).

Despite this body of work, four gaps remain. First, evidence on the medium- and long-term consequences of the pandemic and on the post-pandemic period remains limited. Second, while a large number of descriptive studies have emerged, few have employed causal identification strategies (e.g., Patzina et al., 2025a, b; Möhring et al., 2021; Neugebauer et al., 2024; Sandner et al., 2023). Third, the mechanisms through which disruptions in societal subsystems, such as the labor market or the education system, translate into well-being outcomes remain understudied (e.g., Handschuh et al., 2024; Lan et al., 2022; Laurence et al., 2024; Delhey et al., 2023; Zoch et al., 2022). Fourth, heterogeneous pandemic effects by gender (e.g., Patzina et al., 2025b; Zoch et al., 2022), age (e.g., Handschuh et al. 2024; Patzina et al. 2025a), and other sociodemographic characteristics have rarely been examined systematically alongside medium-term trajectories and underlying mechanisms.

A further challenge concerns the operationalization of subjective well-being. Cognitive, affective, mental-health, and social outcomes do not always move in parallel, and it remains unclear whether observed differences across studies reflect genuine distinctions or are a function of measurement choices. Single studies that apply causal identification strategies to multiple well-being measures simultaneously remain rare.

This special issue addresses these gaps by advancing our understanding of (1) the medium- and long-term effects of the pandemic on subjective well-being, (2) the mechanisms underlying changes in well-being during the pandemic, and (3) heterogeneity in pandemic effects across different population groups in various domains of individuals' well-being - e.g., (life) satisfaction, affective well-being, mental health, social exclusion, and loneliness. The contributions employ identification strategies that aim at estimating causal effects, such as difference-in-differences and fixed-effects estimation to account for unobserved confounders. In doing so, the contributions extend the observation window beyond the acute lockdown shock and privilege causal over descriptive accounts. Overall, the special issue moves the field beyond purely descriptive accounts toward a more nuanced, causally informed understanding of how a major societal crisis affects individual well-being.

The 22 contributions assembled in the special issue advance the literature along four thematic pillars: (i) the medium- and long-term effects of the pandemic and its post-pandemic consequences; (ii) the heterogeneous consequences of the pandemic across population groups; (iii) the mechanisms linking COVID-19-induced changes in societal subsystems to individuals' quality of life; and (iv) the impact of the pandemic on different measurements of quality of life. The studies cover a wide geographical range, including European countries (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the UK, and EU-wide samples), East Asian contexts (Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan), and Israel, and rely on high-quality longitudinal panel data, often drawing on multiple waves collected before, during, and after the pandemic. Methodologically, the contributions go beyond merely cross-sectional descriptions, applying a wide range of causal modelling approaches to identify pandemic effects net of pre-pandemic trends and unobserved heterogeneity.

We organize the discussion of the contributions around four broad outcome domains: cognitive and affective well-being (Sect. 2), mental health and stress (Sect. 3), social exclusion, loneliness, and trust (Sect. 4), and labor market- and education-related well-being

(Sect. 5). Several papers cut across multiple domains and are discussed wherever they speak most directly to the focal outcome. We then conclude with an overarching discussion of cross-cutting findings, methodological lessons, and an outlook for future research (Sect. 6).

2 COVID-19 Effects on Cognitive and Affective Well-being

A first set of contributions investigates how the pandemic affected people's cognitive and affective well-being, with life satisfaction as the primary outcome. This body of work responds to the well-documented limitations in the existing literature. Related to these outcomes, much of the early research relied on cross-sectional data or very short observation windows focused on 2020, thereby limiting insights into medium- and long-term dynamics (Kriechel et al., 2025; Riva et al., 2025). Moreover, only a small number of studies have drawn on high-frequency longitudinal data extending beyond 2021 (e.g., Easterlin & O'Connor, 2023; Huebener et al., 2024), leaving post-pandemic life course trajectories and the broader consequences of the ongoing "polycrisis" largely underexplored (Kriechel et al., 2025).

The contributions of this special issue address these gaps. For example, Kriechel et al. (2025) provide a uniquely long-running picture of subjective well-being in Germany using five waves of biannual panel data from the FReDA survey. Their analyses describe what they aptly call a "rollercoaster" trajectory: well-being shifted in response not only to the COVID-19 pandemic but also to subsequent crises (e.g., the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the energy and inflation crisis), with recovery patterns differing across population subgroups. By extending the observation period beyond the immediate pandemic phase, the study addresses a key limitation of the existing literature, namely its focus on short time horizons and single-crisis perspectives. The study makes the case that observed changes in well-being should not be attributed to the pandemic alone but interpreted within a broader landscape of overlapping societal shocks.

Lohmann et al. (2025) take a closer look at the cognitive dimension by linking life satisfaction to subjective evaluations of one's own economic affectedness during the pandemic, both in absolute terms and relative to others. Drawing on German data, they show that socioeconomic status structures how people evaluate their own economic situation, with lower-SES individuals perceiving their situation as more precarious even absent objective income or employment loss. Crucially, the paper finds that these self-assessments, more than comparisons to others per se, are associated with lower life satisfaction. This finding qualifies prior claims that upward social comparisons explain unexpectedly mild early-pandemic well-being declines. This focus on subjective economic appraisals speaks to a broader gap in the literature, which has often prioritized objective indicators rather than individuals' perceived affectedness as an explanation for changes in well-being.

Koivula et al. (2025) study changes in subjective well-being (operationalized as happiness, life satisfaction, perceived stress, loneliness, and economic security) in Finland between 2016 and 2022, covering both the pandemic and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine. Drawing on nationally representative cross-sectional and panel data, they pursue three aims: documenting the evolution and overlap of different well-being dimensions; identifying heterogeneity across labor market groups (students and the unemployed emerge as bearing a particular accumulation of adverse effects); and tracing how the explanatory

mechanisms of social relations and economic security shifted in importance across crisis phases. By combining multidimensional measurement with a longer observation window, the study overcomes a key limitation of prior research that typically examined single outcomes over restricted periods. Overall, the results suggest a widening of well-being inequalities rather than the levelling-off that crisis theories might predict.

Several contributions concentrate on younger populations, who have featured prominently in concerns about the pandemic's lasting consequences. Riva et al. (2025) document sustained declines in young people's subjective well-being in Switzerland, with those aged 15–24 experiencing more adverse effects than older age groups in both the short and medium term. They identify five factors that mitigated pandemic-related psychological effects among youth: being male, being Swiss by birth, having completed higher education, not living alone, and belonging to higher-income households. These findings highlight socioeconomic stratification in resilience rather than uniform youth vulnerability. Henseke and Schoon (2025), discussed in more detail in Sect. 3, also speak to this domain by separating long-term pre-pandemic trends in young adults' cognitive and affective outcomes from genuine pandemic-induced setbacks, thereby directly addressing the common limitation of conflating pre-existing trends with pandemic effects.

Rußmann et al. (2025) zoom in on a specific but understudied population: doctoral students in Germany. They show that life satisfaction trajectories during the pandemic were stratified by parenthood and gender, with parents, especially mothers, facing larger and more persistent declines. Crucially, childless doctoral students eventually recovered to pre-pandemic life satisfaction levels, while doctoral students with children remained below their baseline even after the pandemic, thus providing direct evidence of differential scarring rather than uniform recovery. This contributes to the still limited evidence on post-pandemic recovery dynamics and life course consequences. The study is an important reminder that even within highly educated groups, family responsibilities create lasting vulnerabilities to pandemic-related stressors.

Bertogg et al. (2026) provide a cross-national perspective on affective well-being, comparing mothers and fathers in Finland, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. Their analysis reveals a “gendered aftermath” that runs counter to early-pandemic expectations: fathers' affective well-being decreased during the second pandemic phase (fall–winter 2020) across Finland, Italy, and the Netherlands (with Germany an exception), while mothers showed reduced well-being only in Germany and Finland. The authors interpret this pattern as a convergence with mothers' lower baseline affective well-being prior to the pandemic, against a backdrop of country differences in family policies and gender regimes. By adopting a comparative design, the study addresses the strong single-country focus that characterizes much of the existing literature.

Two East Asian studies extend the discussion to under-researched contexts. This geographical extension responds to the Western bias in much of the existing evidence base. Ishii and Yamamoto (2025), discussed further in Sects. 4 and 6, examine trends in income and well-being inequality in Japan, including the role of remote work as a mediating mechanism, and finding that, despite the pandemic shock, income inequality did not increase, while well-being inequality widened. In doing so, they address the still limited knowledge on how well-being inequality evolved during and beyond the pandemic. Hsu and Liao (2026) trace multidimensional well-being in Taiwan from the early containment phase to the post-pandemic period, showing that, despite the country's comparatively contained

outbreak, most well-being domains nonetheless declined persistently, with men, younger adults, lower-income individuals, and unmarried persons emerging as the most vulnerable groups. Importantly, the authors find that subjective pandemic concern, instead of objective social distancing control measures, predicted well-being decline across the study period, a finding that echoes other contributions to this issue in privileging subjective appraisals over policy stringency as the proximal driver of well-being change.

Overall, the results suggest that life satisfaction and related cognitive measures followed a non-linear path: an initial dip, partial recovery, and, in some contexts, renewed declines linked to subsequent crises. Taken together, the contributions show that cognitive and affective well-being during the pandemic were shaped less by a single shock than by evolving subjective evaluations of economic security, social inequalities (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, and age), and family-related constraints across successive crisis phases. By leveraging longer observation windows and longitudinal designs, the studies reveal non-linear trajectories of life satisfaction, persistent subgroup inequalities, and the central role of subjective appraisals in driving well-being change over time.

3 COVID-19 Effects on Mental Health and Stress

A second cluster of contributions examines mental health outcomes such as depressive symptoms, psychological distress, and stress using medium-term longitudinal data. While sharing some of the broader limitations outlined above, research on mental health faces several domain-specific challenges. One key limitation concerns the fragmentation of evidence on underlying mechanisms. Although factors such as social capital, institutional trust, volunteering, and labor market disruptions have all been examined, findings remain inconsistent and rarely integrated within a common analytical framework (Kelle et al., 2025). In addition, mental health research is marked by uneven population coverage. Older adults, certain occupational groups, and disadvantaged populations are often underrepresented, while the widespread reliance on web-based or convenience samples raises concerns about representativeness (Van Herreweghe, 2025).

By addressing some of these shortcomings, Hommerich et al. (2025) examine socioeconomic disparities in mental health trajectories during the pandemic in Japan. Their key contribution is to integrate social capital as an explanatory mechanism: they show that social capital buffered mental health impacts across all income groups, but with strikingly stratified patterns: reduced face-to-face communication was especially detrimental for low-income individuals in the early pandemic, while their eventual recovery in late 2021 was driven by regained general social trust and restored confidence in the government's crisis management. Consequently, Hommerich et al. (2025) contribute by combining mediation analyses with evidence from the comparatively under-researched East Asian context, thereby extending both the geographical scope and the analytical focus of the literature.

Ye et al. (2024) study how COVID-19 containment policies influenced depressive symptoms in China, using longitudinal data to identify policy-related effects. Their work links specific policy containment measures to mental health outcomes, showing that depressive symptoms increase during periods of strict lockdown measures. They identify locus of control and unemployment as the dominant mediators; notably, actual COVID-19 infection played only a marginal mediating role, thus indicating that the psychological

costs of strict containment were driven primarily by psychosocial and economic pathways rather than by direct health exposure, and thereby contributes directly to the literature on the mechanisms linking institutional responses to individual well-being. In doing so, the study helps resolve inconsistencies in prior findings on policy effects by identifying concrete mediating pathways.

Egozi-Farkash et al. (2025) use a longitudinal online survey of Israeli adults to track how attachment orientations shifted across three measurement points during the pandemic. They find that anxious attachment increased over time and was a significant risk factor for poor psychological coping, while avoidant attachment declined at the later measurement points. Secure attachment and higher resilience served as protective factors, with psychological variables explaining approximately 30% of variance in traumatic symptoms. A distinctive contribution is the demonstration that attachment orientations, which are typically treated as stable individual dispositions, were measurably destabilized under the conditions of a prolonged collective crisis.

Van Herreweghe (2025) focuses on Europeans aged 65 and over, a group often discussed as particularly vulnerable. The study compares pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic mental distress (depressive feelings, loneliness, and sleeping problems) across European countries. The findings show that depressive feelings and sleeping problems eased only temporarily during the pandemic, while loneliness increased continuously and depressive feelings exceeded pre-pandemic levels again by 2022. Based on these patterns, the author cautions against optimistic conclusions regarding older adults' mental resilience and highlights substantial variation across sociodemographic groups, baseline health characteristics, and country contexts. By explicitly incorporating pre-pandemic baselines and focusing on an underrepresented group, the study addresses key gaps in population coverage and causal interpretation.

Uccheddu et al. (2026) examine whether pre-pandemic core confidant networks shaped the worsening of depressive feelings among Europeans aged 50 and older during the first two pandemic waves, drawing on SHARE data from 28 countries and a k-means typology of seven network types. They find that spouse-centered networks were associated with a lower risk of worsening depressive feelings, whereas friends-centered and extended-family networks, more exposed to distancing measures, were linked to a higher risk, and that women faced higher risks than men across most network types, with a gender gap that was substantially larger in the first wave than in the second. This approach underscores the importance of pre-pandemic social structures and highlights gendered and network-based inequalities that have often been overlooked.

Henseke and Schoon (2025) revisit the mental health impact of COVID-19 on young adults in the UK. By accounting for long-term pre-pandemic trends, they distinguish temporary setbacks during lockdowns from any lasting "scarring" effects, and they show that effects differed by gender, income, age, and ethnicity. In doing so, they directly address the lack of baseline-adjusted analyses and the limited attention to intersecting inequalities.

Qadri (2026) addresses an important but understudied population: keyworkers in the UK. Comparing keyworkers (i.e., essential workers) and non-keyworkers across three infection peaks using fixed-effects models, the study shows that keyworkers, and among them, especially women, experienced stronger associations with psychological distress. A striking sectoral finding is that health and social care workers, despite the highest virus exposure, showed somewhat weaker associations with psychological morbidity than workers in

transport and retail, pointing to the protective role of institutional support and professional recognition, and to the under-resourced nature of other key sectors. The analysis thereby contributes to a mechanism-based understanding of how occupational risk, care responsibilities, and institutional context jointly shaped mental health. Methodologically, the use of fixed-effects models represents an important step toward addressing concerns about unobserved heterogeneity and selection bias.

Two further contributions cut across mental health and other domains. Kelle et al. (2025), discussed in detail in Sect. 4, examine whether volunteering buffered depressive symptoms (alongside loneliness and perceived social exclusion). Ishii and Yamamoto (2025) show that well-being inequality in Japan is closely linked to income inequality dynamics and is partly mediated by the adoption of remote work, thus connecting the mental-health and labor-market literatures. Both studies contribute to addressing the limited and inconsistent evidence regarding the key mechanisms highlighted in prior research.

A common theme across these papers is the importance of distinguishing temporary, lockdown-bound responses from medium-term trends. Average mental health levels recovered relatively quickly in several studies, while specific subgroups (younger adults, women, keyworkers, and low-SES individuals) bore larger and more persistent costs. Taken together, the contributions move beyond early, short-term accounts by showing that mental health trajectories are shaped by the interaction of evolving institutional contexts, social resources, and intersecting inequalities, thereby providing a more coherent and mechanism-based understanding of medium-term adjustment and divergence in mental health outcomes.

4 COVID-19 Effects on Social Exclusion, Loneliness, and Social Trust

A third group of contributions examines outcomes at the intersection of individual well-being and social integration, such as loneliness, perceived social exclusion, and social trust, for which medium-term longitudinal evidence has remained scarce. As in the previous sections, several well-known limitations of the COVID-19 literature remain relevant here, including the reliance on cross-sectional and early-pandemic data, missing pre-pandemic baselines, issues of representativeness (particularly regarding older populations), and the use of convenience samples (Kelle et al., 2025; Van Herreweghe, 2025).

Zannella et al. (2026) contribute to the existing literature by providing a European-wide perspective on perceived social exclusion during the pandemic. Combining individual-level vulnerability indicators with country-level policy measures and subjective perceptions of government responses, they show that the experience of exclusion was shaped jointly by who people were and by where they lived. Notably, subjective perceptions of government efficiency and trust in government were associated with reduced feelings of exclusion, whereas the objective stringency measures implemented by national governments showed no such association; an important contribution to understanding the political economy of well-being during crises.

Kim (2025) uses a difference-in-differences design to show that early regional outbreaks of COVID-19 temporarily reduced generalized trust in South Korea. The effects dissipate as the pandemic progressed, so that trust proved resilient overall. A decline in perceived communication with neighbors partly explained the initial trust reduction, pointing to localized social ties as the key transmission mechanism and illustrating how a localized shock

can ripple outward through interpersonal networks. The study's quasi-experimental design directly addresses concerns about causal identification.

Kelle et al. (2025) ask whether volunteering buffered three closely related outcomes, depressive symptoms, loneliness, and perceived social exclusion, during the pandemic, and whether such buffering effects differed by educational level. Their findings, showing that volunteering, for some outcomes, buffers the pandemic effect, underline civic engagement as a potentially equalizing or, conversely, an inequality-sustaining mechanism, depending on access to volunteering opportunities. By explicitly addressing selection into volunteering and its heterogeneous effects, the study advances the literature in a deeper understanding of the role of volunteering and weak ties in fostering well-being in times of (health) crisis.

Van Herreweghe (2025) speaks directly to the domain of social inclusion by including loneliness alongside depressive feelings and sleeping problems in the analysis of older Europeans' mental distress. Contrary to early narratives of older-adult resilience, the study shows that loneliness rose steadily across the pandemic period and remained elevated post-pandemic relative to pre-pandemic levels, with meaningful country-level variation. By focusing on an underrepresented group and incorporating pre-pandemic comparisons, the study addresses key gaps in both population coverage.

Egozi-Farkash et al. (2025) show that the quality of attachment bonds shaped individual resilience and distress responses across the pandemic period, with anxious attachment increasing as a risk factor and secure attachment serving as a protective resource, thus providing a psychological complement to the more structural analyses of social connectedness in this section. This psychological perspective complements structural analyses of social connectedness by identifying micro-level mechanisms underpinning social integration and vulnerability.

Overall, the results show that social outcomes did not move in lockstep with individual mental health: social trust and perceived inclusion proved more robust than expected in several contexts, while exclusion deepened for vulnerable groups. Civic engagement and institutional responses emerge as important moderators.

5 COVID-19 Effects on Labor Market- and Education-Related Well-Being

A final cluster of contributions examines two subsystems directly disrupted by pandemic-related policies, the labor market and the education system, and their consequences for well-being. This domain is characterized by several specific limitations. A key issue is the strong reliance on occupation-specific or ad hoc surveys, which limits the generalizability of findings (Argentin et al., 2026). Moreover, many studies conceptualize labor market effects in terms of static employment states rather than dynamic employment trajectories, thereby overlooking the nonlinear and cumulative nature of pandemic-related experiences (Möhring et al., 2025). In both the labor market and education domains, research often focuses on single well-being outcomes, such as job satisfaction or academic performance, limiting its usefulness for policy design that requires multidimensional perspectives (Hsu & Liao, 2026).

By addressing some part of the research gaps, Möhring et al. (2025) identify typical employment trajectories during the early COVID-19 phase in Germany and trace how

these trajectories were socially stratified. They then link trajectories to short- and long-term changes in perceived employment insecurity and work satisfaction. The study is a strong example of trajectory-based analyses that move beyond average effects toward a typology of pandemic experiences, thereby addressing the literature's tendency to rely on aggregate or subgroup-specific snapshots.

Argentin et al. (2026) provide a multidimensional analysis of how COVID-19 affected job satisfaction in Italy across short, mid-, and long-term horizons. They find a sharp short-run decline in job satisfaction, but their primary finding is that this effect was temporary: in the mid- and long-term, job satisfaction resumed its pre-pandemic upward trend. They examine four occupational dimensions: precariousness, teleworkability, exposure to unsafe conditions, and essentiality (key-worker status). The findings show that in the short-term only precariousness and essentiality significantly moderated pandemic effects on job satisfaction, while teleworkability and unsafe conditions proved non-significant. By combining a multidimensional perspective with a longer time horizon, the study directly overcomes the narrow focus on single outcomes and short-term effects in prior research.

Peters et al. (2025) compare the subjective well-being of solo self-employed and employees in Germany from 2019 to 2023. The solo self-employed suffered steeper initial declines, but in a notable reversal, their job satisfaction returned to pre-pandemic levels by 2022, while employees' job satisfaction continued to deteriorate into 2022–2023. This trajectory reversal speaks directly to the differential resilience afforded by flexible self-employment and complements analyses focused on standard employment relationships, thereby extending the scope beyond occupation-specific or narrowly defined groups.

Lohmann et al. (2025) connect labor market exposure to overall life satisfaction by emphasizing the role of subjective economic affectedness and social comparisons. Ishii and Yamamoto (2025) similarly link income and well-being trajectories in Japan, showing that the adoption of remote work mediated some of the inequality dynamics observed during the medium-term phase of the pandemic. Both studies contribute to addressing the limited evidence on medium- and long-term inequality dynamics and highlight how labor market changes translate into broader well-being outcomes.

In the education domain, Repo et al. (2025) draw on the Danish Student School Well-Being Survey, linked with administrative register data, to ask whether observed changes in student well-being, inequality, and educational transitions reflect persistent pre-pandemic trends or genuine pandemic effects. By combining a multi-cohort longitudinal design with attention to educational transitions, they make a methodologically careful contribution to the question of whether the pandemic produced lasting “scarring” or merely amplified ongoing developments. Their results suggest that earlier studies overlooking typical age-related and long-term pre-pandemic trends may have overstated the pandemic's negative effects, with academic self-efficacy and school connectedness declining across all cohorts and only minimal differences attributable to the pandemic itself. This approach directly addresses both the scarcity of representative longitudinal data and the tendency to misattribute ongoing trends to the pandemic. Hsu and Liao (2026) complement these analyses by tracing multidimensional well-being in Taiwan, including domains tied to work and education, thereby responding to the need for more comprehensive, policy-relevant measures of well-being and investigations in different cultural contexts.

Two patterns stand out. First, occupational characteristics, e.g. telework feasibility, key-worker status, and employment precarity, emerge as important moderators, with the pandemic

often amplifying pre-existing inequalities. Second, typology-based approaches (Möhring et al., 2025; Peters et al., 2025), multi-horizon designs (Argentin et al., 2026), and multi-cohort designs (Repo et al., 2025) reveal heterogeneous trajectories that average-effect analyses cannot capture. The results also show that labor market and education dynamics cannot be separated from broader life satisfaction trajectories, reinforcing the case for integrated analytical frameworks. Taken together, the contributions move the literature beyond short-term, narrowly focused analyses by demonstrating how structurally embedded inequalities and multi-dimensional well-being processes unfold over time within and across institutional domains.

6 Conclusion and Outlook

The 22 contributions assembled in this special issue advance our understanding of the pandemic's consequences for subjective well-being in three key ways.

First, by extending the observation window into the post-pandemic period, the studies show that the picture of a uniform, sharp, and lasting decline in well-being, which constituted a prominent finding in the early pandemic literature, does not hold up. Average trajectories often display partial recovery, sometimes followed by renewed declines linked to subsequent crises (Kriechel et al., 2025). Whether the pandemic left lasting “scars” depends strongly on the population subgroup, the specific outcome considered, and the broader societal context (Henseke & Schoon, 2025; Van Herreweghe, 2025).

Second, the contributions reinforce and refine the message that pandemic effects were socially stratified. Mothers (Rußmann et al., 2025), young people (Riva et al., 2025), keyworkers (Qadri, 2026), the solo self-employed (Peters et al., 2025), and individuals with lower socioeconomic status (Hommerich et al., 2025; Lohmann et al., 2025) bore disproportionate costs. Notably, fathers and not mothers emerged as the more affected parental group during the second pandemic phase across most country contexts examined by Bertogg et al. (2026), reflecting a convergence with mothers' lower pre-pandemic baseline rather than a simple amplification of gendered disadvantage. At the same time, several studies complicate stereotypes about vulnerability: older Europeans, for instance, showed only temporary improvements in some mental-health domains during the pandemic alongside continuously rising loneliness, leading the author to warn against unjustified optimism about their resilience (Van Herreweghe, 2025). A related pattern of narrative revision runs across several contributions: the groups conventionally assumed to be most at risk did not always prove most affected. Europeans showed resilience in depressive symptoms but not in loneliness (Van Herreweghe, 2025). And the solo self-employed, which were assumed to be especially exposed, ultimately showed a recovery in job satisfaction that eluded employees (Peters et al., 2025). These findings collectively suggest that vulnerability is context-specific, outcome-dependent, and often non-linear across time.

Third, the studies advance our understanding of the mechanisms through which pandemic-related disruptions translated into well-being outcomes. Social capital (Hommerich et al., 2025), volunteering (Kelle et al., 2025), attachment orientations (Egozi-Farkash et al., 2025), perceived communication with neighbors (Kim, 2025), social comparisons (Lohmann et al., 2025), policy measures and perceptions of government responses (Zannella et al., 2026; Ye et al., 2024), the composition of pre-pandemic core confidant networks (Uccheddu et al., 2026), and the adoption of remote work (Ishii & Yamamoto, 2025) emerge as central path-

ways linking macro-level shocks to micro-level outcomes. Across several of these papers a consistent pattern emerges: subjective perceptions of institutional legitimacy and government responsiveness mattered more for individual well-being than the objective content of policies. Whether governments were trusted to manage the crisis effectively and not merely whether they acted shaped mental health trajectories (Hommerich et al., 2025; Zannella et al., 2026), influenced social trust dynamics (Kim, 2025), and mediated the link between policy stringency and depressive symptoms (Ye et al., 2024; Hsu & Liao, 2026). This convergence points to institutional credibility as an under-theorized moderator of well-being during crises.

Methodologically, the contributions combine long-running longitudinal data with causal identification strategies. They also show that the choice of well-being measure matters: cognitive, affective, mental health, and social outcomes did not always move in parallel, which suggests that single-measure studies may understate the multidimensional nature of well-being during crises.

Several open questions remain. First, despite the medium-term horizons of many contributions, the longest “long term” still covers only a few years; truly long-term consequences for educational trajectories, careers, and family life will become observable only with continued data collection. Second, while the special issue covers a wide range of countries, evidence remains thin for the Global South and for vulnerable groups within high-income societies (e.g., migrants, people with disabilities). Third, future work would benefit from integrating well-being outcomes more systematically with behavioral and biomedical measures, and from comparing the COVID-19 experience to other large-scale societal shocks.

This special issue serves both as a stocktaking of what we have learned about the pandemic’s impact on subjective well-being, and as a stepping stone toward future research that takes seriously the medium-term, heterogeneous, mechanism-based, and multidimensional nature of well-being in times of crisis. The challenge ahead is to specify when, for whom, and through which mechanisms they leave lasting traces and to identify the social, institutional, and policy conditions under which recovery prevails.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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