



Research Report | February 2024

Workforce Well-Being in the North Superior Region

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By: William Dunstan

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- Thunder Bay is on Robinson-Superior Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of the Anishnaabeg and Fort William First Nation.
- Kirkland Lake is on the Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and the land is the traditional territory of Cree, Ojibway, and Algonquin peoples, as well as Beaverhouse First Nation.

We recognize and appreciate the historic connection that Indigenous peoples have to these territories. We support their efforts to sustain and grow their nations. We also recognize the contributions that they have made in shaping and strengthening local communities, the province, and Canada.

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Partners



North Superior
Workforce Planning Board



Commission de planification
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North Superior Workforce Planning Board:

The North Superior Workforce Planning Board (NSWPB) has partnered with Northern Policy Institute (NPI) to assess workforce well-being in the North Superior region. This report provides a picture of how the workforce in communities served by NSWPB is doing on five pillars of well-being. The report can be used by government, non-profit, and private sector decisionmakers to inform efforts to ensure members of the local workforce are thriving in various dimensions of life and can maximize their productivity and economic contributions.

About the Author

William Dunstan



William Dunstan is a recent graduate of Carleton University's Public Affairs and Policy Management program. During his undergraduate studies, William learned about the wide world of public policy and developed a particular research interest in economic policy and regional development. Professionally, he has worked in several policy-related roles both in the think tank sphere and with the federal government. Originally from Ottawa, William developed a love for Northeastern (or Central) Ontario and the region's high quality of living during his time as an Experience North intern in 2021.



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Executive Summary

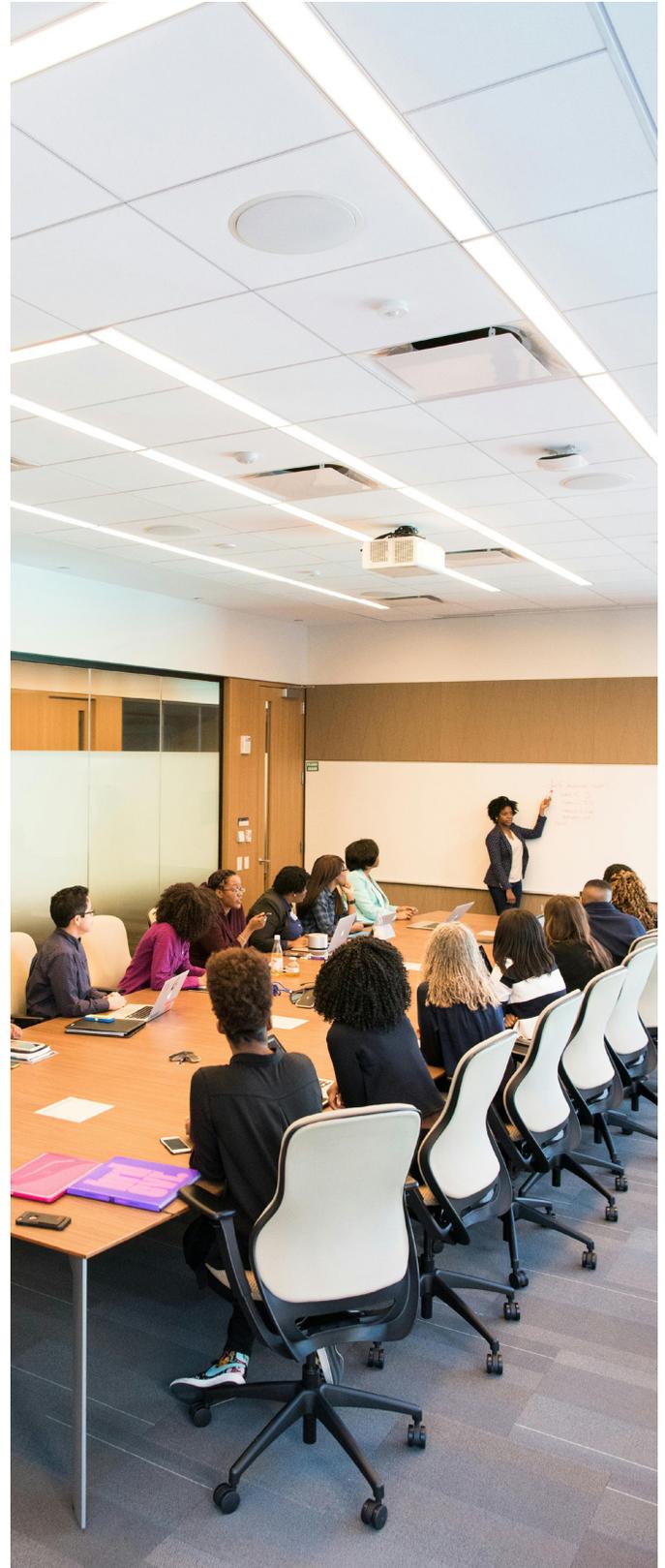
Worker well-being is a critical aspect of workforce planning. Ensuring that workers are thriving in various dimension of life supports the well-being of both these individuals and the economy, as happy and healthy workers can maximize their productivity and economic contributions.

As part of Northern Policy Institute's (NPI) annual Measurement Month initiative, NPI conducted a survey in February 2023 that asked individuals across Northern Ontario about their personal well-being. The results of this survey reveal important information about workforce well-being in communities served by the North Superior Workforce Planning Board (NSWPB) and in the rest of Northern Ontario.

In the survey, workers in the NSWPB region indicated relatively high levels of well-being in four areas (or "pillars"): emotional and mental, social and community, purpose and meaning, and physical. Workers reported lower levels of financial well-being, suggesting that personal finances are a major source of stress. Furthermore, there were regional differences in responses: workers in the NSWPB region reported lower levels of emotional and mental and social and community well-being than workers living elsewhere in Northern Ontario.

It can be said, then, that the average worker in the NSWPB region is doing well across various aspects of life, but is, compared to their peers elsewhere in Northern Ontario, worse off in regard to emotional and mental health and interpersonal relationships. This suggests there is an opportunity for employers, communities, and service providers in the NSWPB region to improve workers' well-being in these areas. Investigating why their workers experience comparatively poorer well-being and what actions may be taken to improve workforce well-being should be priorities.

Another action item is to repeat this survey in future years to support evidence-based decision-making. Collecting data across multiple years will indicate which aspects of well-being are improving or worsening. Additionally, it would reveal whether the finding of lower average well-being in communities served by NSWPB is a persistent trend or a one-off phenomenon specific to this year or sample.



How to Measure Well-Being

There is not one single, widely accepted set of pillars or dimensions of well-being or "wellness." Different researchers and organizations identify different aspects of well-being. Nevertheless, there is a significant overlap between the pillars and dimensions identified by these sources. Often, the discrepancies between sources are simply the result of categorizing similar aspects of wellness differently. Different terms may be used for essentially identical concepts. What some sources refer to as "emotional" well-being may be called "mental" well-being by others, and the concept of "spiritual" well-being that appears in some sources is similar to the "purpose and meaning" pillars used in others. Sources also differ in whether they use a smaller number of broadly defined pillars or a greater number of more narrowly defined pillars. "Physical wellness," for example, can be one pillar or it can be divided into multiple pillars, such as nutritional, fitness, and health. Ultimately, despite the superficial discrepancies between many sources, it is possible to adopt a single pillar of well-being framework that reflects content shared by most of the literature.

A sample of literature regarding pillars of well-being and wellness and their definition and measurement illustrates the similarities between different sources. Stoewen (2017) identifies eight dimensions of wellness: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental. Weziak-Bialowolska et al. (2021) have developed a "comprehensive instrument designed to assess holistic well-being in six domains: emotional health, physical health, meaning and purpose, character strengths, social connectedness, and financial security." Bart et al. (2018) discuss several approaches to measuring wellness that use anywhere from three to twelve domains. For instance, they note that the Lifestyle Assessment Questionnaire assesses ten wellness domains: physical fitness, physical-nutritional, physical-self-care, drugs and drinking, social-environment, emotional awareness, emotional control, intellectual, occupational, and spiritual.

Beyond illustrating a rough consensus on the various pillars of well-being, this literature also reflects a shared understanding of what "wellness" is. Each of the aforementioned sources recognizes that wellness encompasses many factors and represents more than the absence of negatives such as illness and poverty. The World Health Organization (WHO) offers the following comprehensive definition of wellness: "Wellness is the optimal state of health of individuals and groups. There are two focal concerns: the realization of the fullest potential of an individual physically, psychologically, socially, spiritually and economically, and the fulfilment of one's role expectations in the family, community, place of worship, workplace and other settings" (Smith, Tang, and Nutbeam 2006, 344).

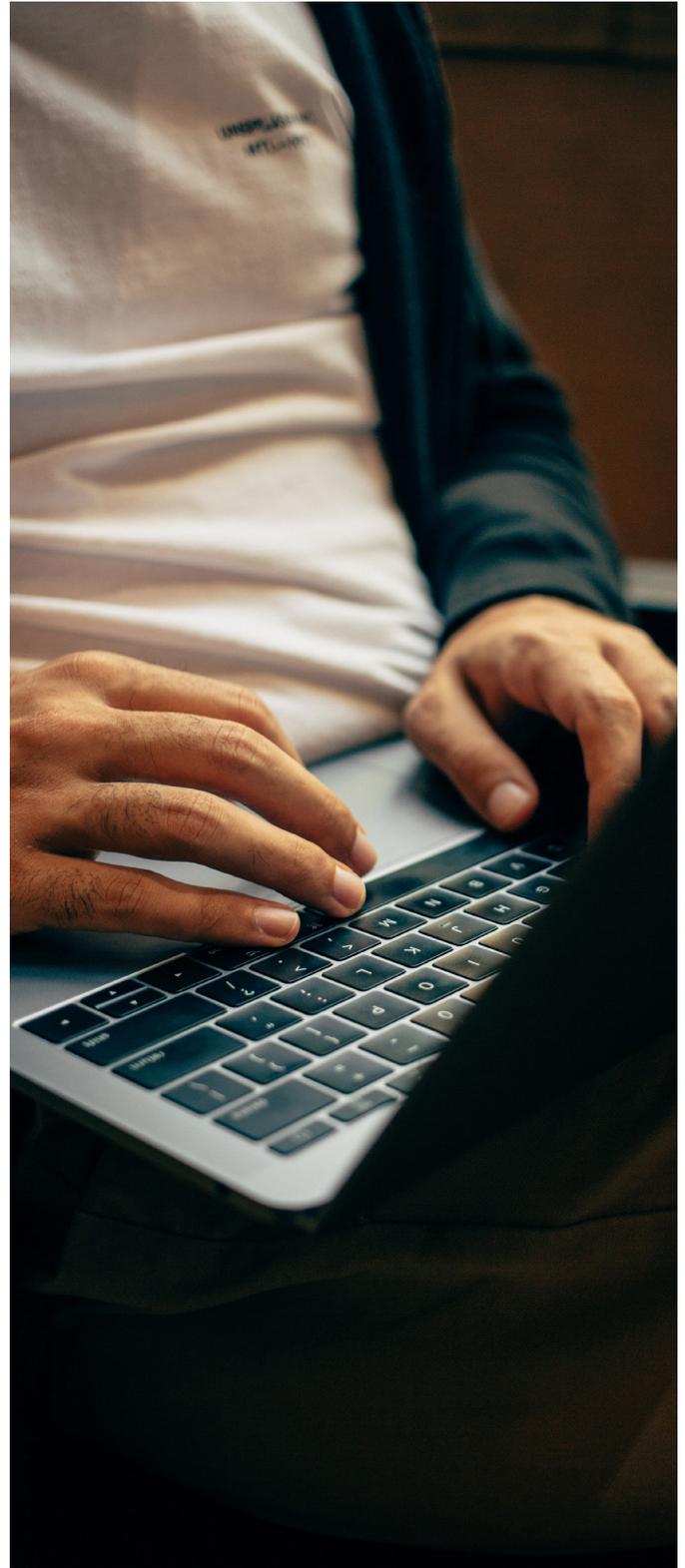


How Well-Being Is Measured for this Report

This report assesses five pillars of well-being. The list of pillars was developed by identifying common themes among the various lists found in the literature. Additionally, the five pillars each encompass part of the WHO's definition of wellness. **The five pillars selected for this report are: (1) emotional and mental, (2) social and community, (3) purpose and meaning, (4) physical, and (5) financial.** Emotional and mental well-being is concerned with one's mind, and encompasses happiness, life satisfaction, and emotional stability. Social and community well-being concerns one's connections to and relationships with others and the well-being derived from these interactions. Purpose and meaning refer to the sense that one's life is valuable and worthwhile and to one's ability to find purpose and meaning in life. Physical well-being concerns one's body, and encompasses physical fitness, nutrition, and injury and illness. Finally, financial well-being is the extent to which one's financial situation allows one to achieve the other four pillars of well-being.

The pillars of well-being are usually measured through self-assessment. As many aspects of these pillars are subjective personal feelings and beliefs, they can be measured only by asking individuals to assess their wellness. Self-assessment is usually done through surveys (for example, Bart et al. 2018; Weziak-Bialowolska et al. 2021). Survey questions often take a form similar to: "On a scale from 1 to 5, to what extent do you agree with the following statement."

To measure well-being for this report, a similar approach was adopted. NPI and NSWPB developed a 19-question survey that asked individuals 3 or 4 questions about each pillar of well-being, as well as a question regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their personal well-being. It was determined that this list of 19 questions captured the core aspects of personal well-being, while being short enough to garner a high response rate. This "pillars of well-being" survey was included in the larger "individual experience" survey conducted as part of NPI's Measurement Month in February 2023. A copy of the survey is provided in the appendix of this report.



Survey Results

Sample

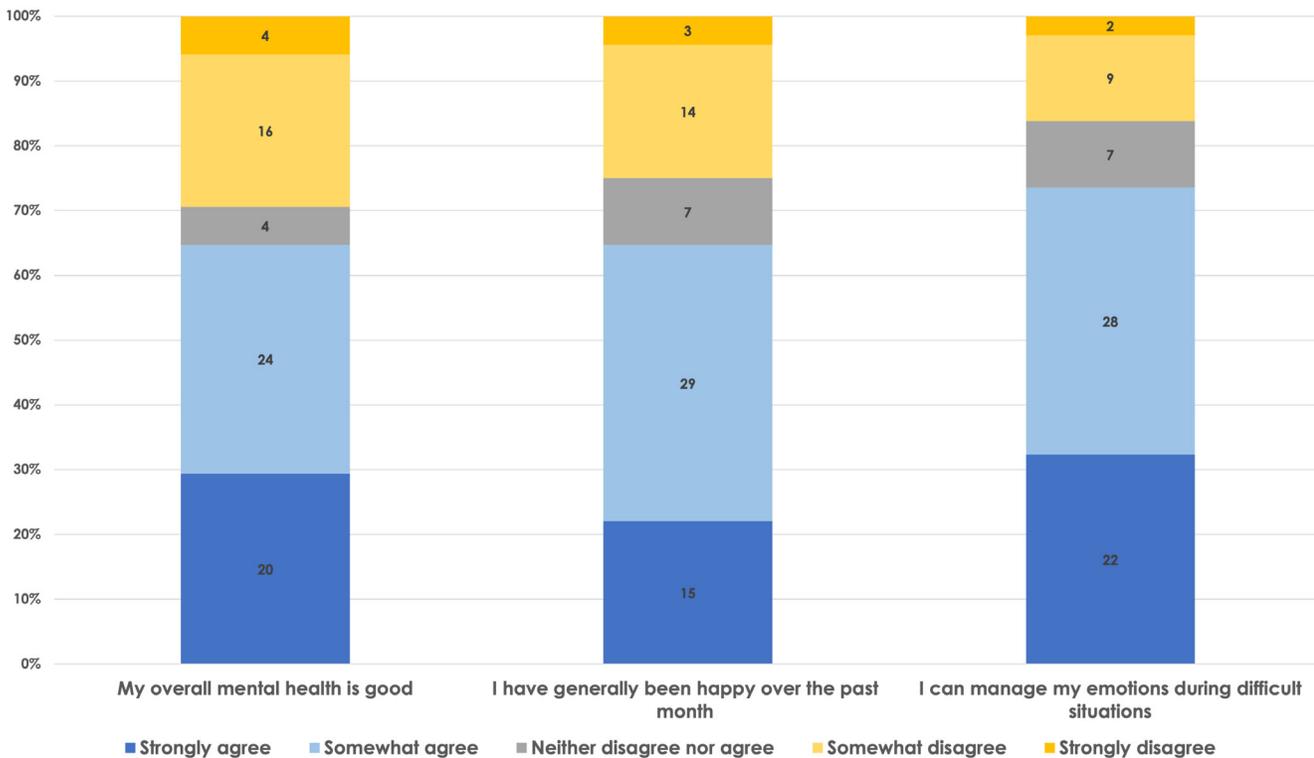
In total, 68¹ individuals completed the pillars of well-being survey, lived in communities served by NSWPB,² and indicated they were active in the labour force in February 2023. Twelve of these 68 respondents identified as Indigenous. Twenty-nine respondents were male, 33 were female, and 6 indicated another gender identity or opted not to disclose. Of the respondents, 43 had lived in their current community for more than ten years

(24 born and raised, 19 had moved), 9 had lived in their community for six to ten years, 8 for one to five years, and 8 for less than one year. Respondents to the survey had, on average, higher educational attainment than the total population. Forty-eight respondents, or 70 per cent, had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 25 per cent of Thunder Bay District residents ages 25 to 64 in 2021 (Statistics Canada 2022).

Pillar 1: Emotional and Mental

For the emotional and mental pillar, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: (1) My overall mental health is good; (2) I have generally been happy over the past month; (3) I can manage my emotions during difficult situations.

Figure 1: Responses for Emotional and Mental Pillar



Of the three statements provided for the emotional and mental pillar, respondents tended to agree most strongly with "I can manage my emotions during difficult situations." The other two statements received similar average responses, but more people strongly agreed or disagreed with "My overall mental health is good" than with the statement "I have generally been happy over the past month."

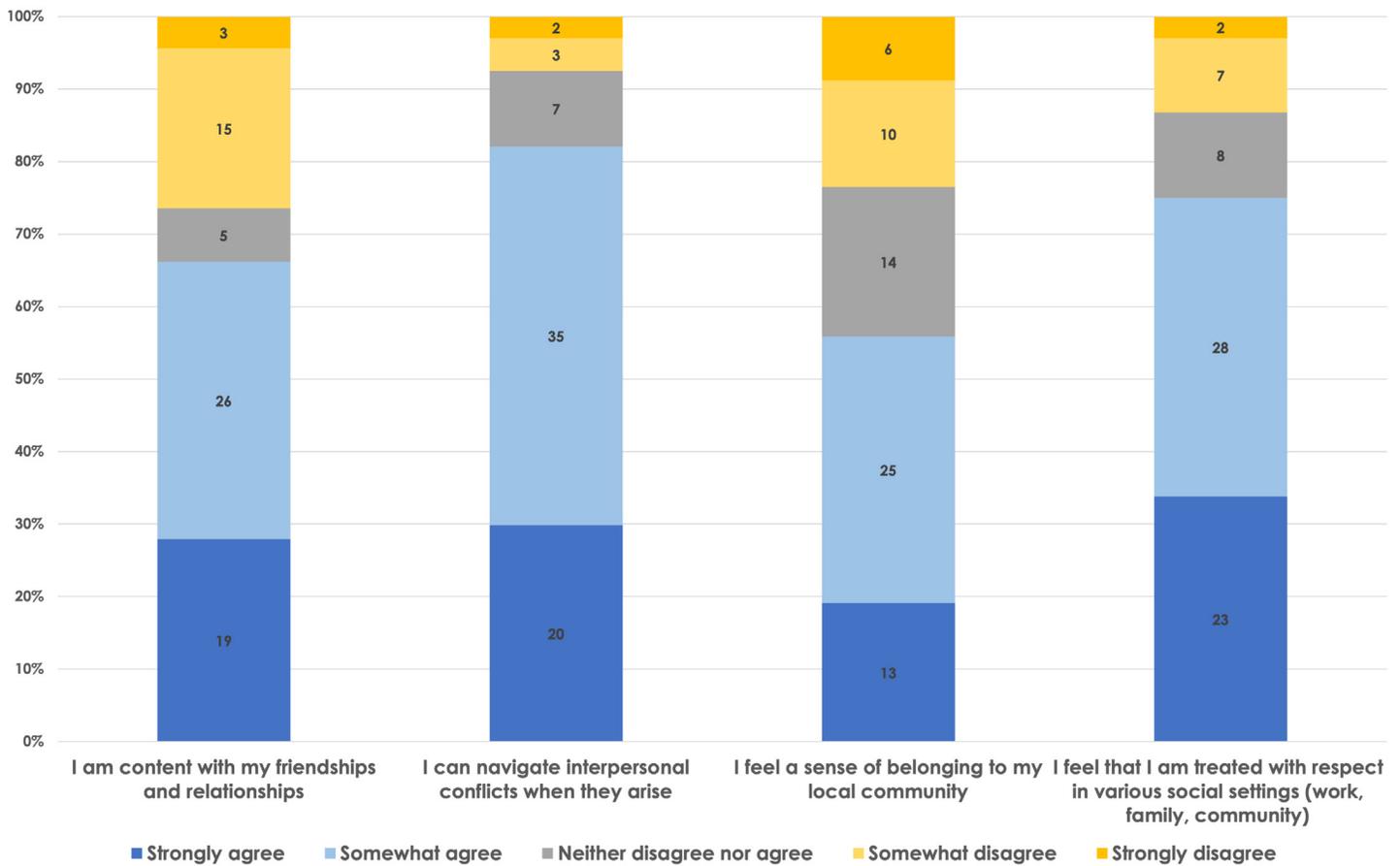
¹ Several questions received 67 responses.

² NSWPB provides services to communities throughout the Thunder Bay District and several communities outside the district (NSWPB 2023).

Pillar 2: Social and Community

For the social and community pillar, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: (1) I am content with my friendships and relationships; (2) I can navigate interpersonal conflicts when they arise; (3) I feel a sense of belonging to my local community; (4) I feel that I am treated with respect in various social settings (work, family, community).

Figure 2: Responses for Social and Community Pillar



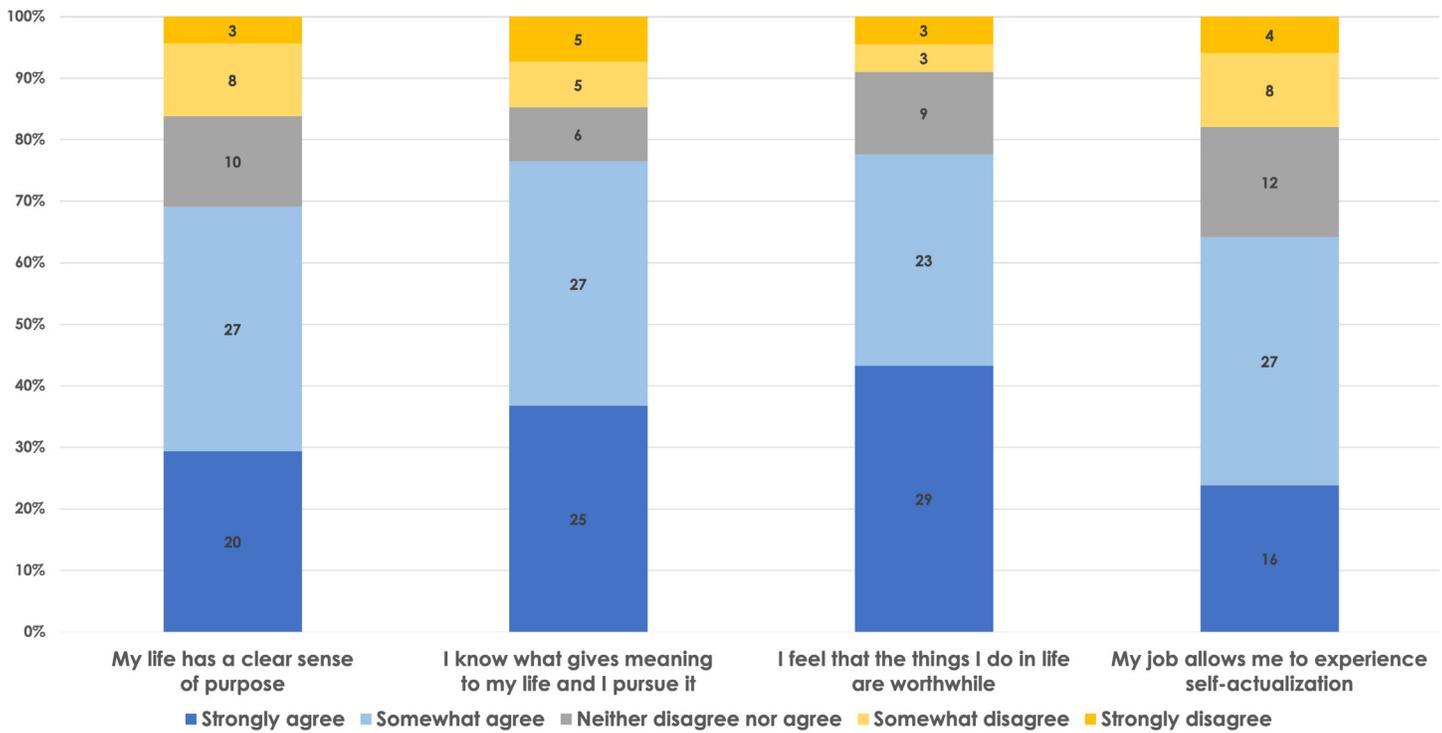
Overall, respondents tended to agree more with “I can navigate interpersonal conflicts when they can arise” and “I feel that I am treated with respect in various social settings” than they did with either “I am content with my friendships and relationships” or “I feel a sense of belonging to my local community.” This suggests that respondents are enjoying greater success in avoiding negatives such as conflict and disrespect than in achieving positives such as friendship and belonging.



Pillar 3: Purpose and Meaning

For the purpose and meaning pillar, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: (1) My life has a clear sense of purpose; (2) I know what gives meaning to my life and I pursue it; (3) I feel that the things I do in life are worthwhile; (4) My job allows me to experience self-actualization.

Figure 3: Responses for Purpose and Meaning Pillar



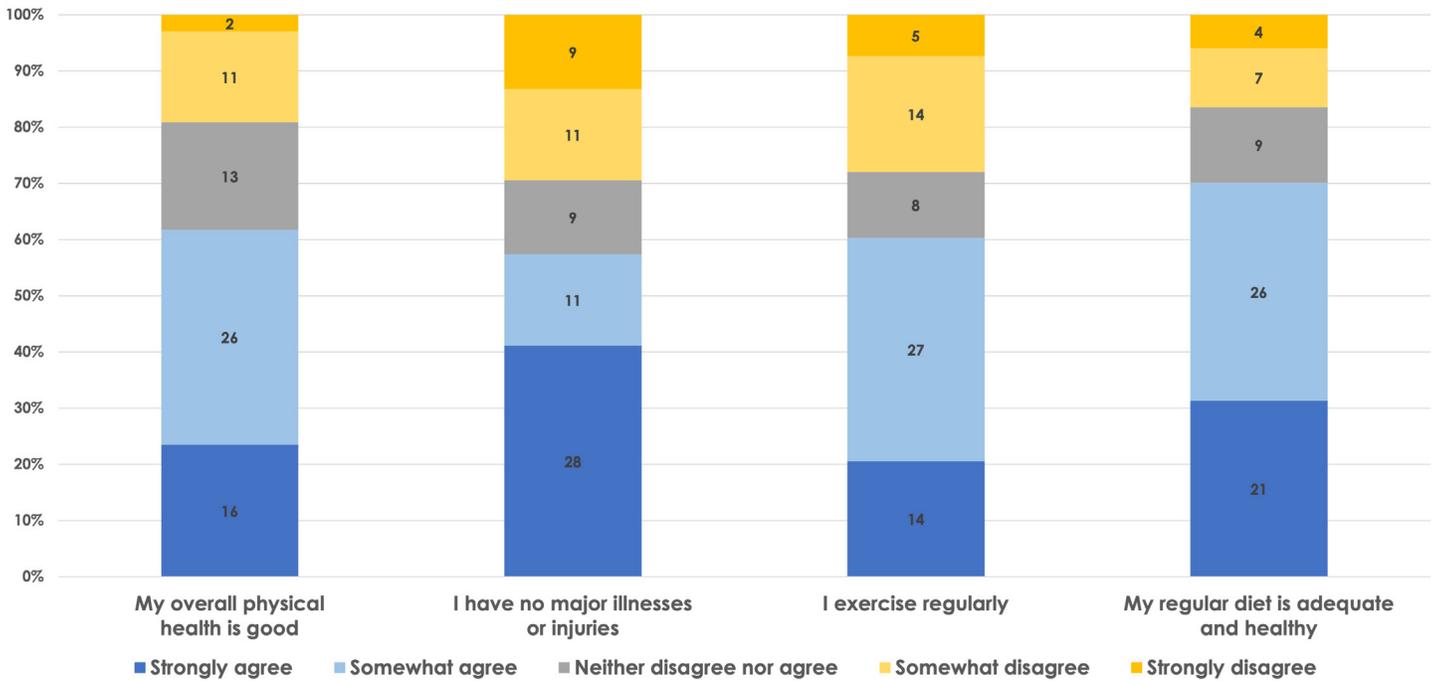
The four purpose and meaning statements generally received positive responses — that is, respondents tended to agree with them. Indeed, of all five pillars, statements for this pillar received the most positive responses. Fewer respondents agreed with the statement, “My job allows me to experience self-actualization.” Fewer than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they experience self-actualization through their jobs. Nevertheless, the more positive responses to the other three questions suggest that many people find purpose, meaning, and worth outside of work.



Pillar 4: Physical

For the physical pillar, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: (1) My overall physical health is good; (2) I have no major illnesses or injuries; (3) I exercise regularly; (4) My regular diet is adequate and healthy.

Figure 4: Responses for Physical Pillar



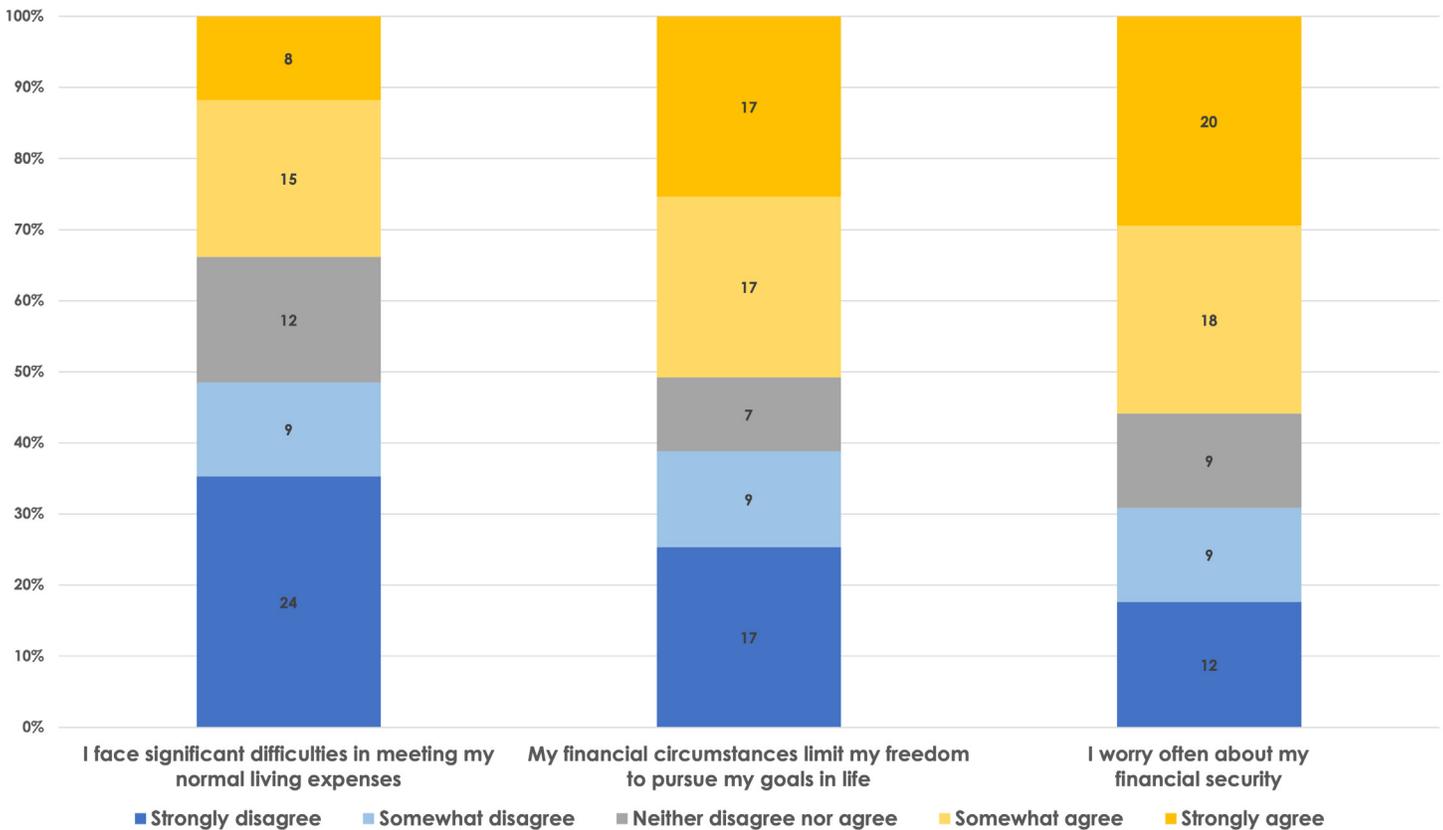
Apart from the “financial” pillar, the four statements for the “physical” pillar received, on average, the most negative responses. That said, responses for each statement were overall more positive than negative. Respondents most disagreed with the statements “I have no major illnesses or injuries” and “I exercise regularly,” although the former also saw more than 40 per cent of respondents select “strongly agree.” Of the four statements, “My regular diet is adequate and healthy” received the most positive average response.



Pillar 5: Financial

For the financial pillar, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: (1) I face significant difficulties in meeting my normal living expenses; (2) My financial circumstances limit my freedom to pursue my goals in life; (3) I worry often about my financial security.

Figure 5: Responses for Financial Pillar



Compared to the other four pillars, respondents indicated the lowest level of well-being for the financial pillar. Two differences between the financial pillar and the other four may have led to these comparatively negative responses. First, while the statements provided for the other four pillars inquire directly into personal well-being, the financial pillar statements relate to how one's finances impact one's well-being. Second, the level of well-being indicated by the various response options is reversed from the first four pillars. When responding to statements about the first four pillars, a "strongly agree" response indicates the greatest well-being. When responding to the financial statements, however, a response of "strongly disagree" indicates the greatest well-being. If survey respondents are prone to agree to

statements offered in this survey, they could be prone to giving more positive responses to the first four pillars. Of the three statements provided, respondents disagreed most with: "I face significant difficulties in meeting my normal living expenses." Respondents agreed most with "I worry often about my financial security." In fact, of the 18 statements offered in the pillars of well-being survey, the only one to which a majority of responses were negative was "I worry often about my financial security." This suggests that financial security is a major concern for workers in communities served by NSWPB, even among those who do not face significant difficulties in meeting living expenses.

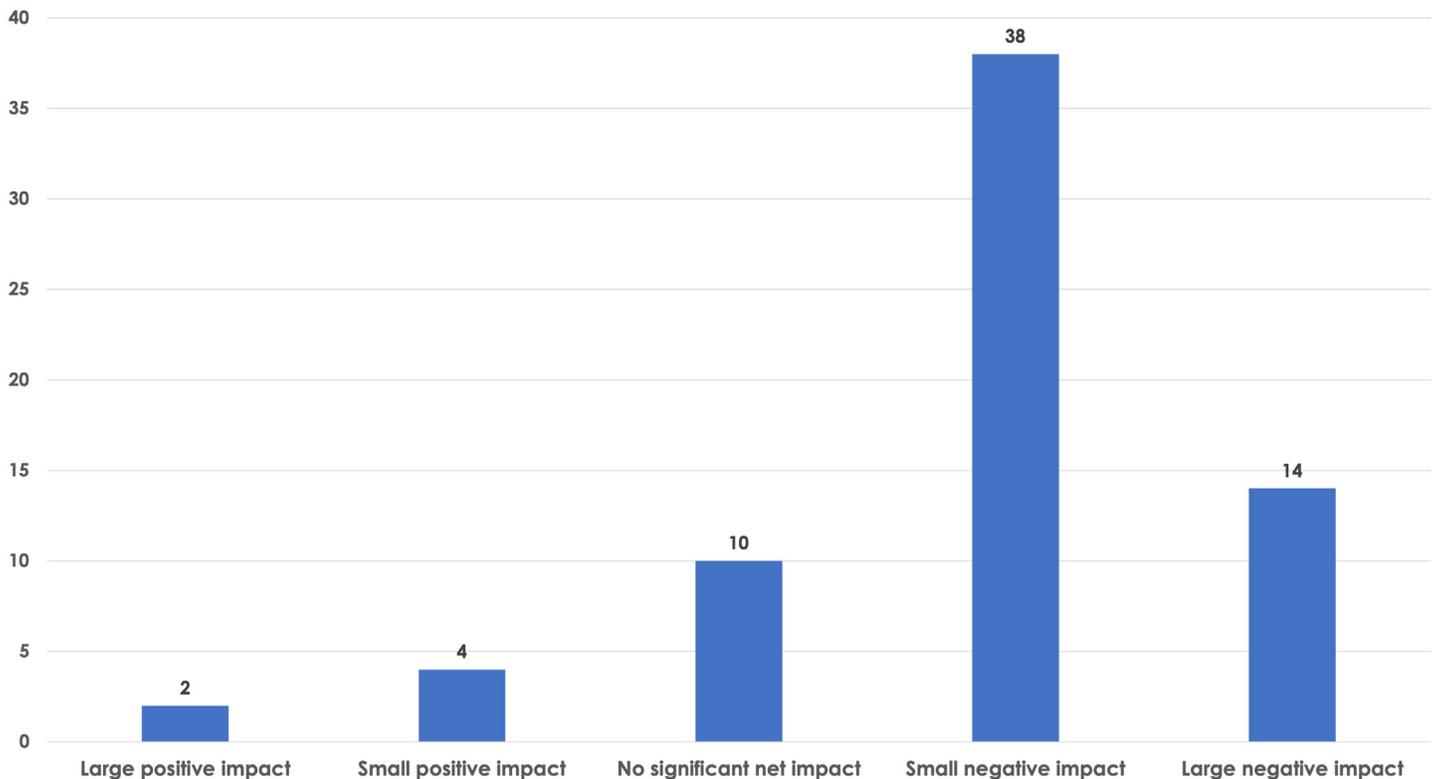
Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

In addition to the 18 questions relating to the five pillars of well-being, respondents were asked what impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on their overall well-being. As Figure 6 shows, most respondents (76 per cent) indicated that the pandemic had a negative impact on their well-being.

Seventy-three per cent of these respondents indicated that the negative impact was small. Fifteen per cent of respondents indicated that the pandemic had no significant net impact on their well-being. The remaining respondents (9 per cent) indicated that the pandemic positively impacted their well-being.



Figure 6: Responses to “What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your overall well-being?”



Comparison between Questions and Pillars

In this section, average response scores are calculated for each pillar, then compared with one another. Each response option is assigned a score from 1 to 5 to calculate average response scores, with 1 representing the least amount of well-being and 5 representing the most.³ For the financial pillar, a response of strongly agree receives a 1, somewhat agree receives a 2, neither agree nor disagree receives a 3, somewhat disagree receives a 4, and strongly disagree receives a 5. For the other four pillars, the scoring is reversed: a response of strongly agree receives a 5, somewhat agree receives a 4, neither agree nor disagree receives a 3, somewhat disagree receives a 2, and strongly disagree receives a 1.



Table 1: Average Response by Pillar, Respondents Who Live in Communities Served by NSWPB

Pillar	Average Response Score	Standard Deviation
Emotional and mental	3.68	1.07
Social and community	3.74	0.86
Purpose and meaning	3.82	0.97
Physical	3.60	0.92
Financial	2.96	1.36

The financial pillar received the lowest average response score by some margin: 2.96. As mentioned earlier, however, the financial pillar may not be entirely comparable to the other four pillars. Among the four non-financial pillars, the only statistically significant difference in average response scores is that scores for purpose and meaning are higher than those for the physical pillar.⁴

Put differently, one can be confident that, among the workforce in communities served by NSWPB, there is a real difference between average levels of purpose and meaning and average levels of physical well-being, as well as between the financial pillar and the other four pillars. By contrast, other differences observed between pillars may be due to chance.

³ There is some debate as to whether responses to Likert scale surveys — such as this “pillars of well-being” survey — produce interval or ordinal data. There is an equal difference between each response option with interval data, so it is possible to calculate mean (or average) figures for these data. For ordinal data, there is not a clear, equal difference between response options, so such statistics cannot be calculated. Empirical research has shown that Likert scales (e.g., each of the five pillars in this survey) produce interval data (Carifio and Perla 2008). Therefore, it is appropriate to calculate “average response scores” for each pillar.

⁴ Statistical significance was determined using a one-way ANOVA with post-hoc *t*-tests.

Correlation between Pillars

Table 2 shows the correlation between average response scores for each of the five pillars. A strong correlation between pillars would suggest that different aspects of well-being are linked or that there are some underlying drivers of well-being in various areas of life. In Table 2, all the correlations are positive, indicating that greater well-being on any one pillar is associated with greater well-being on other pillars.

Between the four non-financial pillars, correlations are generally moderately strong. This suggests that there is some connection between these four pillars, but that the pillars are still relatively independent of one another. The correlations between these pillars and the financial pillar are mostly weaker; however, the correlation between physical and financial well-being is on the boundary between weak and moderate. This suggests that, among the workforce in the NSWPB service area, financial well-being has little influence on other aspects of well-being.

It should be emphasized that, in this study, “financial well-being” reflects individuals’ perceptions of their financial limitations and stress; the results do not reveal anything about the association between income and wealth and personal well-being.

Moreover, there is a pattern regarding the strength of the correlation between pillars and the presence of a statistically significant difference between them. For the five pairs of pillars for which there is a statistically significant difference between average response scores, the correlation between these scores is less than 0.4. For the five pairs of pillars for which there is not a statistically significant difference between average response scores, the correlation between these scores is greater than 0.4. This suggests not only that the pillars with strong correlations are related to each other, but also that this relationship manifests in similar levels of well-being across pillars.

Table 2: Correlations between Average Response Scores for Each Pillar

	Emotional and mental	Social and community	Purpose and meaning	Physical	Financial
Emotional and mental	-				
Social and community	0.64	-			
Purpose and meaning	0.57	0.60	-		
Physical	0.41	0.54	0.33	-	
Financial	0.14	0.05	0.01	0.37	-



Comparison with the Rest of Northern Ontario

Because it was included as part of NPI's Northern Ontario-wide "individual experience" survey, the pillars of well-being survey also received responses from outside the communities served by NSWPB. In total, 185 respondents indicated they were active in the labour force and lived in a Northern Ontario community not served by NSWPB. Table 3 shows the average response scores for these 185 respondents and compares them with the average response scores shown in Table 1. On average, respondents who lived outside the NSWPB service area reported greater emotional and mental and social and community well-being. This discrepancy in average response scores cannot be easily explained by differences between the two samples that can be identified with the information collected through

the survey. For the other three pillars — purpose and meaning, physical, and financial — there was no statistically significant difference between the well-being reported in and outside the NSWPB service region.⁵

These results suggest that employers and service providers in communities served by NSWPB may be underperforming their Northern Ontario peers in promoting workforce well-being. Alternatively, lower average well-being could be attributable to other factors independent of the actions taken by employers and service providers. Further research would be required to provide a definitive answer as to why the communities served by NSWPB appear to have poorer workforce well-being than other communities in Northern Ontario.

Table 3: Comparison of Average Responses by Pillar between Communities Served and Not Served by NSWPB

Statement	NSWPB Communities	Rest of Northern Ontario	Difference
Emotional and mental	3.68	4.03	-0.35
Social and community	3.74	3.98	-0.24
Purpose and meaning	3.82	3.90	-0.08*
Physical	3.60	3.76	-0.16*
Financial	2.96	3.05	-0.09*

* Difference between pillars is not statistically significant.

Regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer respondents who lived in communities outside the NSWPB service area reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their overall well-being (63 per cent as opposed to 76 per cent for those in the NSWPB service area). An equal share of respondents in both regions

reported that the pandemic positively impacted their well-being, but more respondents who live outside the NSWPB service area reported that the pandemic had no significant net impact (27 per cent as opposed to 15 per cent).

⁵ Statistical significance was determined using a two-sample t-test.

Conclusion

Overall, respondents to the pillars of well-being survey who live in communities served by NSWPB and indicated they were active in the labour force in February 2023 tended to report relatively high levels of well-being. However, for the social and community and emotional and mental pillars, average levels of well-being were lower in communities served by NSWPB than in the rest of Northern Ontario. For the other three pillars, regional differences were not statistically significant.

Respondents in the NSWPB service area indicated their well-being was lowest on the financial pillar, suggesting that personal finances are often a major source of stress. Nonetheless, survey responses suggest that such financial stress is not strongly associated with reduced well-being in other areas of life. Differences between other pillars were mostly statistically insignificant. That said, there was one statistically significant difference: respondents' well-being on the purpose and meaning pillar tended to be greater than their physical well-being.

Repeating this survey in future years would allow for a richer analysis. Collecting data across multiple years will indicate which aspects of well-being are improving or worsening. Additionally, it would reveal whether this survey's finding of lower average well-being in communities served by NSWPB is a persistent trend or a one-off phenomenon specific to this year or sample.



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Appendix:

Pillars of Well-Being Survey Questions

Emotional and mental

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

1. My overall mental health is good
2. I have generally been happy over the past month
3. I can manage my emotions during difficult situations

Social and community

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

1. I am content with my friendships and relationships
2. I can navigate interpersonal conflicts when they arise
3. I feel a sense of belonging to my local community
4. I feel that I am treated with respect in various social settings (work, family, community)

Purpose and meaning

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

1. My life has a clear sense of purpose
2. I know what gives meaning to my life and I pursue it
3. I feel that the things I do in life are worthwhile
4. My job allows me to experience self-actualization

Physical

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

1. My overall physical health is good
2. I have no major illnesses or injuries
3. I exercise regularly
4. My regular diet is adequate and healthy

Financial

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)

1. I face significant difficulties in meeting my normal living expenses
2. My financial circumstances limit my freedom to pursue my goals in life
3. I worry often about my financial security

COVID-19

1. What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your overall well-being?

- a. Large negative impact
- b. Small negative impact
- c. No significant net impact
- d. Small positive impact
- e. Large positive impact

About Northern Policy Institute

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent, evidence-driven think tank. We perform research, analyze data, and disseminate ideas. Our mission is to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts our communities, our province, our country, and our world.

We believe in partnership, collaboration, communication, and cooperation. Our team seeks to do inclusive research that involves broad engagement and delivers recommendations for specific, measurable action. Our success depends on our partnerships with other entities based in or passionate about Northern Ontario.

Our permanent locations are in Thunder Bay and Kirkland Lake. We currently have a satellite office in North Bay. During the summer months, we have satellite offices in other regions of Northern Ontario staffed by teams of Experience North placements. These placements are for university and college students working in your community on issues important to you and your neighbours.

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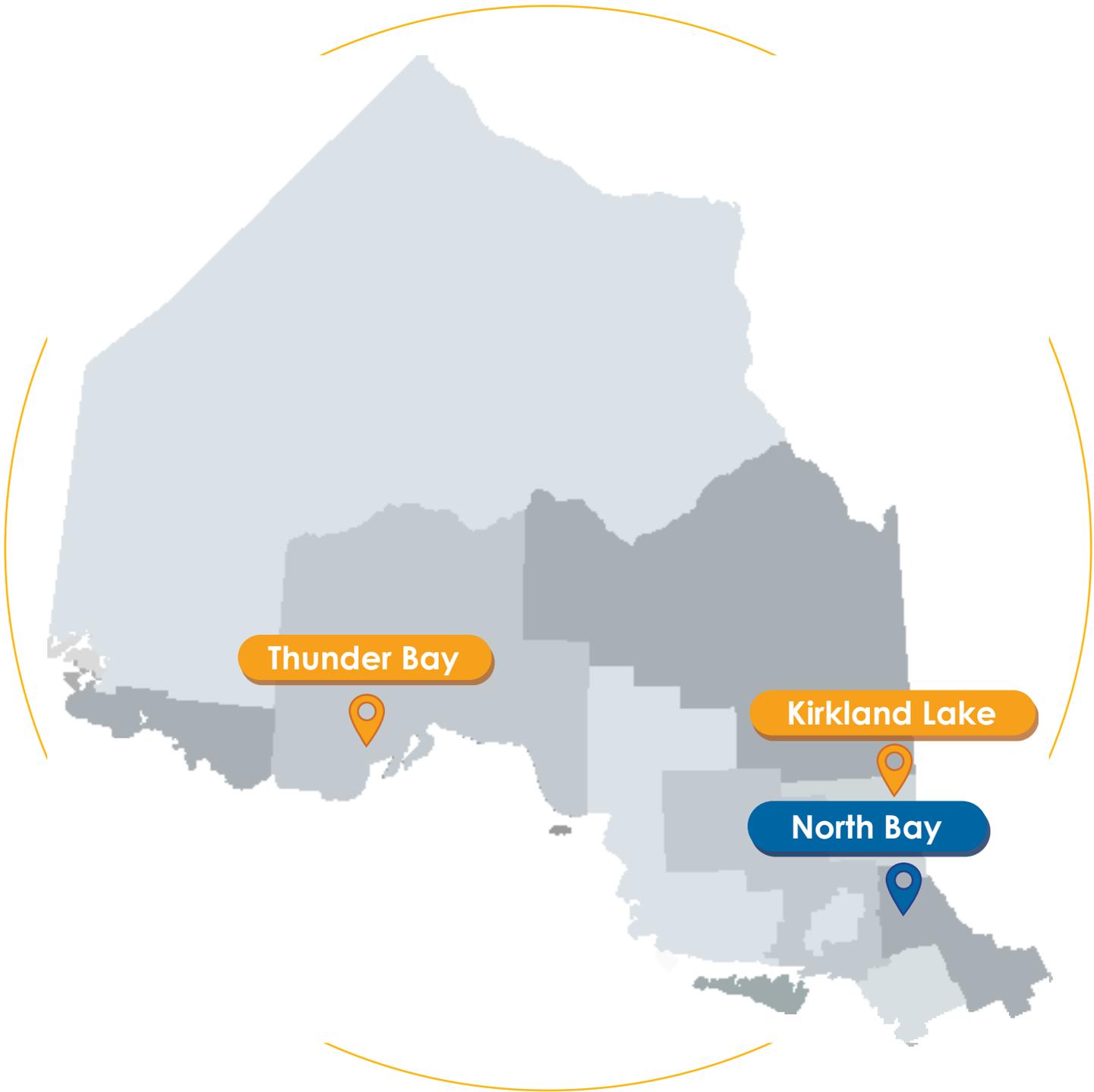
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