

Fifty years on, is life better for everyone?



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About this time every year, Australians are struck by an uncharacteristic bout of self-reflection.

As we swan around on beaches, we pause to ask ourselves the big questions.



Illustration: Jim Pavlidis

Questions like: why do I always forget to put sunscreen on the tops of my feet?

It's also about this time we turn our minds to making – and inevitably breaking – new year's resolutions; the motivation behind this ritual presumably being the hope that this year might prove, in some way, better than the last – that we may be just that little bit happier, skinnier or more successful at work.

So it's an interesting time to reflect on the question of whether life is, in fact, getting better.

Just last month, the US-based Pew Research Centre released the latest findings of its global survey, which puts exactly that question to a sample of almost 43,000 people across 38 countries.

More precisely, they pose the question: "In general, would you say life in [your country] today is better, worse, or about the same as it was fifty years ago for people like you?"

Think about it. What would you say?

I think most people have an instinctive response, but let's run through the potential pros and cons.

Let's start with the cons.

Today, the leader of the free world is a tangerine-tinted bloated bloviate. North Korea has its finger on the button. Terrorism is a scourge in our most treasured global cities.

Global leaders have failed to find an effective solution to the climate-changing effects of the pollutants we've been belching – and continue to belch – into our atmosphere. An increasingly interconnected world means the risk of global pandemics has increased, while overuse of medicines, including antibiotics, risks rendering them becoming newly ineffective as a response.

Rapid technological changes have displaced many workers, while shackling most of us, herd-like, to the glowing screens of our smartphones, which seem to act as lightning rods for an emerging culture of outrage and offence.

OK.

What about the pros?

Rising life expectancy must surely top the list, fuelled by advances in medical technology and greater understanding of how to cure our major maladies.

In Australia, we're better educated than ever before, and living standards have risen appreciably. We're richer, the past quarter-century having marked a period of continuous growth, unscathed by the pockmarks of large rises in unemployment.

It's never been easier, or cheaper, to enjoy world travel, while advances in communication technologies, such as the internet, mean it has never been easier to connect with loved ones and strangers alike. The same iPhones that so vex us, also offer up a hitherto unimaginable cornucopia of knowledge and connection.

As a woman, it's hard not to want to considerably extend this list with no-fault divorce, career opportunities and safe and legal abortions.

So, do you have your answer? Let's see how it compares.

When researchers put the question to Australians, exactly half of us declared life "better" than 50 years ago – putting us slightly ahead of the global average of 43 per cent.

But fully a third of us – 33 per cent – answered "worse", which was, granted, lower than the global average of 38 per cent.

A further 12 per cent of us thought life was "about the same" and 5 per cent didn't know or didn't say.

Clearly, not everyone is feeling better off.

Globally, people with lower levels of education were less likely to feel life had improved, presumably reflecting the changing job market towards knowledge-intense jobs.

Older people were also more likely to be nostalgic for the past.

In Australia, 63 per cent of people aged 18 to 29 rated life as better now, as did 55 per cent of people aged 30 to 49.

Only 41 per cent of people aged over 50 thought the same. This dispersion between the answers of old and young was among the widest in the global survey.

Whether you believe life is getting better seems very much to depend on who you are.

For women, minorities and sexually diverse people, it's hard to deny the progress that's been made.

As a woman, I find it hard to deliver any other verdict than a resounding "better". Sure, women today juggle a lot of competing pressures of work and family life. But better to have the choice.

But the situation is less clear for other groups. Changing social norms have the potential to also liberate the white, straight men of this world, allowing them to lead more emotionally rich, connected lives.

But studies in the US have shown worrying trends in declining life expectancy for white, middle-aged men in US.

The economic fortunes of the country you live in emerge as a major driver of whether people believe life is getting better.

So, as we think about the year ahead, it's a good time to remember that progress is indeed possible. But it is not always linear, and it is certainly not evenly spread for everyone at every time. We should all pledge to work harder in the New Year to ensure life does indeed get better, for all of us.