



Conversation with Kari Wolanksi

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell us about the work you do?

Kari Wolanksi: I'm Kari Wolinsky and I'm the acting director of the Center for Social Data Insights and Innovation at Statistics Canada. We have the Quality of Life Statistics program. I previously worked at the Department of Finance designing Canada's Quality of Life framework.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit more first about Statistics Canada and then about the specific area and department that you're working in.

Kari Wolanksi: So Statistics Canada, I like to tell my young nephews that we count people. So they have an atlas that has all these little factoids, like what's the tallest mountain and how many people live in different countries. So I like to tell them I count people, which is slightly amusing. I'm going to tell a little story because when my nephew was staying with me, he was very disappointed when I didn't leave the house and was working remotely because how was I going to count people from home? It was a very cute moment. So basically we have the census, hundreds of years of history there. We have the national accounts, the system of national accounts, the measures, the core macroeconomic indicators, GDP etc. We also have a variety of social and environmental indicators and a long and interesting history there.

We have some novel stuff like the Census of Environment, which isn't my area, but a really interesting intersection with the Quality of Life Statistics program. We also have a range of statistics we've been measuring for some time, things like victimization rates or health measures. We have a long history of subjective measures. So how are Canadians doing? That part gets perhaps more prominence in the Quality of Life Statistics program.

So the area of Statistics Canada that I work in produces social statistics and the area in particular that I work on knits together the pieces in terms of telling a broader, high-level story across areas of social statistics, but also interfacing with economic and environmental statistics.

Ashley Hopkinson: OK so it's similar to the U.S Census Bureau where it's data that can inform policy decisions and help to determine how support reaches people, whether that's hospitals, roads, education, schools etc.

Kari Wolanksi: Yes and increasingly we also use administrative data for that sort of thing as well as our traditional beat, which is surveys.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is the easiest bucket of data that you track and let me preface this by asking you to share more from your unique background and how it's distinctive.

Kari Wolanksi: My background is policy, but my beat is what I would call measurement policy or policy about measurement. So I've worked in a variety of different areas that focus on what we should measure and why with an emphasis on how we tell what are the problems of the day? Where should the government focus? And if they're focusing somewhere, was it enough? Which groups are most impacted or left behind? That's the area that I focus on.

Ashley Hopkinson: And what would you say are the key buckets that you measure or rather areas of focus in terms of measurement?

Kari Wolanksi: So in the quality of life framework, we have five actual buckets. So maybe I'll start there. So one of those buckets is prosperity. So that does include those core economic measures like growth...although we measure growth per capita, cost of living, etc. housing, future prospects in terms of future outlook, which is more of a subjective perspective. So that's the prosperity bucket.

Then we have a health bucket and the health bucket looks at physical health, mental health, life expectancy, but also the health of our care systems. Measures like access to primary care providers etc. We have an environmental bucket that looks at things like air quality, water quality, as well as emissions, biodiversity, conserved areas etc.

Then we have a society bucket that looks at, for example, a sense of belonging to a local community, are our communities accessible in Canada, official language is very important as well as Indigenous

languages and cultural retention and self-determination. We also have a good governance bucket that looks at crime, safety and that sort of thing as well as confidence in institutions.

Underpinning all of that is this idea of subjective wellbeing as measured by two measures specifically. One is life satisfaction, so overall how satisfied are you with your life, and then sense of meaning and purpose, which is do you feel like the things in your life have meaning? That one's actually a new measure that we introduced as a result of the quality of life framework.

In terms of what's easier or harder, that's complicated. But maybe what I can focus on is what's maybe a bit newer and what's maybe being elevated through the Quality of Life Statistics program, which is the Canadian Social Survey.

So in social statistics, often the history is these infrequent very deep dives. So maybe every five years we go in, we go big, we ask a lot of really, really detailed questions and really get involved in a space... But a lot has changed at every juncture along the way within five years.

So we've been really focusing on the timeliness of data, like how frequently do we collect these data. Let's say confidence in institutions. Historically that's been something that's been slow moving, but lately there's a lot happening in that space. And so what we're trying to do is we're trying to use this quarterly survey. So it's not as deep a dive. We don't ask as many people, but we go every quarter and we're trying to create a more consistent time series so we can track how these things are evolving over time. That's a newer area for us.

Ashley Hopkinson: And that's the Canadian Social Survey?

Kari Wolanksi: That's right.

Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned the Canadian Social Survey and the importance of doing it quarterly now, but is there something else that pops up where you're like, okay, this is why we're doing the work that we're doing. This is why social statistics matter?

Kari Wolanksi: I know in this Beyond GDP space and the wellbeing economies, sometimes those core economic statistics are viewed with a bit of hostility or suspicion. And so this may be slightly counterintuitive, what I'm going to say, but nevertheless, I think the thing about measuring statistics is they tell you things whether or not you like them. And so here's the thing, is that as inflation rose, people are having more and more difficulty making ends meet, it really had quite a dramatic impact across these other indicators. So for example, life satisfaction, sense of belonging, sense of meaning and purpose moved alongside difficulty making ends meet. So it gradually increased and then it

became a pinch point. And at that pinch point, it really had this flow on impacts on other indicators of quality of life.

People are having a hard time paying for their lives, they're stressed out, and their quality of life takes a hit. But it's less obvious to me that that would have an impact on your sense of belonging or sense of meaning and purpose. To me that was really interesting. It's also interesting because I think historically these quality of life frameworks come and go with the economic cycle.

So often when times are good, we start thinking about quality of life and having nice things. And then everything tightens up. People get anxious about money, really focused on the fundamentals. An important thing to think about is we don't stop measuring GDP when there's a recession. It becomes particularly important to measure. And so continuing to measure these social trends, not just when things are going great, I think is important.

Another is life expectancy. Life expectancy has taken a hit, and in some respects that's not surprising on the tail end of a pandemic, but it's actually really the opioids crisis that's really throwing around the measure. The reason is it's because, I don't want to sound cold here, if you die a little bit earlier than you would have otherwise, that doesn't move around the overall life expectancy for a society in the same way as losing decades of your life to an overdose earlier in life. And so it just really comes out and highlights the importance of the opioids crisis in terms of overall life satisfaction, life expectancy, and it's an important issue for us to be thinking about.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given all of that, what do you think is missing from the conversation around wellbeing economics when it comes to data?

Kari Wolanski: So I'm going to start with something slightly different than what you asked because if I was given the opportunity to make the case for social data, this is what I would make the case for and it's really boring. I would like us to be measuring the same things over and over and over and over and over again on a very consistent interval so that when something changes, you know that it's changed. What often happens with social issues is something comes up, there's a media focus on a thing, there's a lot of people talking about a thing. And so then we're like, oh, we need a policy intervention. So people go, they create a measurement infrastructure, they dig in and build a measurement infrastructure that's focused on showing that that thing is working. Right? But by the time they've already gotten all that happening, the baseline is gone, the thing that we're trying to solve. And so having this stability in the social data landscape; it's that consistency.

I take this Beyond GDP brief very literally, the GDP comes back to us quarter after quarter after quarter. It comes out on a set day. People know to expect it. They know what it means if it contracts two quarters in a row. Even if they don't really know very much about it, they think they do. And so I think what I would love to see is consistency for social and environmental indicators, that they're more timely, they're more consistent, and that people are more disciplined in looking at that historical trend and in context and saying, okay, actually this was a really big change. This one really matters. This one's a blip. Let's see what it means. And so that means that stable investment in that long-term core funded data landscape. So that's what I would make the case for.

In terms of why we should make that case, I think people are losing confidence in institutions and the pace of change is accelerating. And so the types of data that you can have access to if you're a company are just so incredibly micro and detailed...and so it means that people have come to expect a level of personalized and customized service from the private sector that's entirely based on this deep knowledge of them through data.

Part of the case for social data is that we need to put that into perspective by having really meaningful things to say about how people are doing that, grounded in statistical techniques that are robust, that protect people's information, that are for the common good rather than for profit. Societally expectations about the level of the pace, the granularity of data have wildly accelerated. And so if we aren't making investments in public data, it makes our institutions look dumber and slower if we're coming back a couple years after the fact and saying, hey, did you know in 2021... People are kind of like, what, 2021? That feels like a lifetime ago to me now.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's such a good point. During the pandemic in particular there was a break from the norm and really rapid data response. There was a hyper measurement. So I see what you're saying in terms of what the algorithms can do with Facebook and Instagram, when our public institutions don't mirror that speed, it can feel clunky.

Kari Wolanksi: That's exactly it.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you think of any other challenges that you would say you face in the work in terms of a gap that you would like to see filled? You definitely just touched on it with the let's just measure the same thing over and over and over again so that we could really see the blip come up. Are there any other challenges in the work that come to mind?

Kari Wolanksi: Sometimes it feels like a scramble to secure the resources and energy to do these things that seem really important, whereas there's a stable, funded, coherent, clear pathway for some

things that were just built that way. Maybe over time we could be reevaluating which things are the stably funded, secure things, like how does social and environmental statistics rank in the order compared to economic statistics? I'm not suggesting we stop producing GDP but you can also see it in poverty numbers. When the economy contracts, the poverty numbers move too. So I think measuring GDP remains very important. But at the same time, I think there's so much that we can learn from how the GDP data ecosystem functions as a strategy for measuring and tracking something important that we could apply to solve other problems and measure other changes in a consistent way.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's a good segue into my next question. Given the right support, what would you want to prioritize? Would it be something else under social and environmental statistics like another version of the Canadian Social Survey?

Kari Wolanksi: I would love to see that just be stable and that data just flowing in, in a regular way, so that we could really focus on getting the insights from the data, more analytical resources. I don't want to make this all about money. But it's something about the systems orientation where some things are more work to protect than others, and it has to do with societal prioritization or actually legacy priorities that are baked into administrative systems. So it's rewiring some of our institutions to think about how we would build them today knowing what we do today about the relative importance of environmental and social statistics.

Ashley Hopkinson: If we centered wellbeing in measurement while maintaining other priorities, what would we get in return? In other words, what do you think is the value add of having this more centered in economics conversations.

Kari Wolanksi: We know a lot of things because we have decades and decades of time series about the GDP and international examples of it on a consistent basis. We know a lot of things about what moves the GDP, what causes it to grow, what causes it to shrink, what happens when it shrinks or grows, why does this matter? Right? So what I would like to see is this growing insight, what makes people's lives better? We're seeing concerning trends in youth mental health. What is driving that? There's some obvious hypotheses. They were particularly affected in terms of social isolation during the pandemic. There's this whole world of online bullying and harms that they're exposed to that they didn't (previously exist). Our societies were dislocated and some of that social cohesion isn't there.

What I think we would gain from that is training models. We would have more observations to be able to understand when this happens, does this also happen? Does it happen every time or was it particular to this one instance? What are the social impacts of an economic shock? This is actually a research project that we're looking into, but which communities are really scarred by a natural disaster

socially versus which ones bounce back and can you then build that resilience? Are there characteristics that if we can isolate them help to insulate communities from natural hazards in the future knowing that we're likely to see more of them? So I think it's building out those protective factors, better understanding not just what causes harm, but what insulates people from harms or which investment dollar has the most impact in terms of really driving a healthy community or reducing unequal access to opportunities over generations etc.

Ashley Hopkinson: I like the framing about not just what's causing harm, but what is a way to insulate people from harm. What seems bold about Reimagining Economics work is shifting from legacy ways of measuring things. Is there anything that you've worked on that has brought more synergy between policy and measurement or community organizations and data? A new model of sorts?

Kari Wolanksi: Yes, there is some stuff I'm pretty excited about. So I mentioned at the beginning that I previously worked at the Department of Finance. The reason I worked at the Department of Finance was that it was originally tasked to design this framework. And the reason for that is that it was hardwired into the federal budget process. So decisions about how the federal government spent this money.

Now if you go to the budget template, you can see that it's available online. You have to identify the expected quality of life impacts of any budget proposal according to the indicators in the framework, and each federal budget has an impacts report section that reports on those expected impacts. It's not super fancy. It's not like X quantity of life satisfaction per dollar spent. It's an intuitive link, but by making that intuitive link, it flows to the departmental reporting structure and the accountability that they have to Parliament. So they're also required to report on whether they are achieving the outcomes that they said that they would achieve when they ask for the money?

So you have this cycle building. What I think is profound about it is those processes existed prior to this initiative, but what's different about the quality of life framework is it pushes the outcomes that people are focused on up the value chain. We enrolled 2,700 people in this training and we are aspiring to improve people's future outlook. So the shift in where you're aiming is different. I think that's transformative.

On the community front, something amazing happened. Well, first of all, I think it's important to say that the governor of Canada didn't just wake up one day and say let's build a framework. There was a history of community organizations and academics who were actively building this space prior to that. And so that community recognized itself in the framework and self-mobilized to develop the Canadian

Wellbeing Knowledges Network, which is this group of academics and community providers and municipalities in some cases or provinces and territories who are interested in this wellbeing space.

They're trying to galvanize to build towards potentially getting something like the [UK's What Works Wellbeing Centre](#) in Canada. So it's this amazing organization that sprung up. Sprung up makes it sound easy. A lot of people did a lot of hard work. Sprung up from my perspective because it happened itself, organically happened based on the commitment and motivation and mobilization of a number of key academics and community leaders. So that's been very exciting. They're using the network to learn how to inform what they do in various lines of business. It could be municipal governments who want to build a framework. It could be trying to get a better understanding of evidence out there from academia about what works. It could be trying to get a better understanding about the data trends from us, etc.

Ashley Hopkinson: What have you found has really worked well in the field of social data since you've been a part of this work?

Kari Wolanksi: There are a lot of people who really care about this, and if you can connect those people together, then the magic happens. There's just people who light up about this. I'm one of them. There's others. And so when you get that connection between people who want to be working and active in this space, you get partnerships that happen and that are alive. So they have their own self-generating energy and momentum. I did this exercise once about values and the point was made that values are like a battery. It's like an energy source. And so there's something about this space that energizes people and energizes collaborations and builds momentum. That's just a marvelous thing to behold and participate in.

Ashley Hopkinson: I love that. I wrote down values are like an energy source. I would like to go back to something you said earlier about the pace of change. In terms of data measurement that can move in a way to accelerate social change, do you see it as possible? Do you have any examples that come to mind of it moving quickly to accelerate some kind of change?

Kari Wolanksi: First a slow example, then a quick one. It's slow but not that slow. When the current administration came in in 2015, they made some commitments around child poverty and they introduced a poverty reduction strategy and they set poverty targets, and those are one of the sustainable development goals. So this poverty reduction strategy was introduced. It had targets. And so essentially what I think is really amazing about the poverty reduction strategy is it came group by group, year after year, and introduced different policy settings to focus on lifting different groups out of poverty. So there are still groups who live in poverty and there are some people who it's not just

income that's going to change things for them. See earlier comments about the opioid crisis for example.

And so it's not that poverty is solved in Canada, but there's a substantial reduction in poverty, substantial measurable reduction. And the thing that I really want to call attention to is it was population group by population group by population group. So we're going to reform child benefits. We're going to reform senior pensions. We're going to reform the income for working age adults who have low incomes. Still to come, disability benefits. Then added to that investing in some things that are really expensive for families, like child care or dental care. So there's this progressive chipping away over the course of a decade basically at these various different determinants of poverty. I think that's a pretty amazing accomplishment. Slightly unsung. This is the thing about moving slowly.

On the moving fast, I had the privilege of working at the Privy Council Office, which is the Department of the Prime Minister during the early days of Covid. And wow, did we ever move fast to stand up the income supports and the supports to businesses during the early days of the pandemic. It was hectic and there were flaws in terms of a number of people who got the benefits, who didn't qualify for the benefits, but there weren't the right controls. But that was a deliberate choice that was made. It was like, we just need to get this money out the door. This is the risk we're willing to take because the important thing is to support people to stay home and shut down the normal course of our routine so that we can break the cycle right away.

We bought ourselves a whole lot of time and saved a lot of lives by having such a quick response. And there was really quite an outpouring of support at that time. It was a peak in confidence in institutions for a brief shining moment where people were writing articles like, "Ladies and gentlemen, I salute you," That was a newspaper article, like an editorial for people who were developing and implementing... Actually, that's a really important point because policy initiatives get signed all the time very quickly. They do not get implemented quickly and well very often. People like to talk about policy and politics a whole lot more than they like to talk about implementation, until it goes wrong. Then there's all these disastrous stories about failed implementation.

This is where measurement can play a role. It's like, what is the problem? Let's measure it. What is the prospective solution? Let's use evidence to inform it, including evidence about what worked elsewhere. Let's implement it, monitor it, and see if in fact, in executing the policy, we're delivering the intended outcomes. And if we're not, let's recalibrate. Let's go back to the evidence and think, are we doing enough? Are we targeting the right people? Is there something we've missed?

Here's an example of something we missed. We have all these income support programs that I've described in Canada, which are fantastic and well thought through. However, if you don't file your taxes, you don't get them. There's a whole group of people who (aren't) filing taxes, paying money, don't have money or their lives are chaotic so they're not in a position to, or there are other reasons as well. So there's this whole issue of benefit take up where people are missing out on income that could make a really big difference in their lives. So there is an example of implemented best laid plans in terms of policy design, but some challenges around implementation and then a really concerted strategic focus on implementation to try to make sure that we're reaching people. So to me that's really quite an amazing example of implementation of policy or using the evidence to say, well, this group is actually getting left behind. Let's focus on how we can make things better for them.

Ashley Hopkinson: As it relates to social statistics, what does a good economy look like when we think about how we measure what we measure? And when we consider the impact on communities and the planet?

Kari Wolanksi: Those are hard questions. I think it's somewhat redistributive. There's some measure of support. There's a floor under which the most vulnerable are supported not to fall. There's a certain measure of personal freedom and autonomy as well. There's a certain level of empathy built in that's respectful that not everyone had the same start in life and that affects everything from their day-to-day behaviors and competencies, interacting with other people, and handling crises, all those things to their ability to save and plan for the future etc. So I think there's a certain amount of empathy built in.

There has to be some opportunity to be rewarded for effort at the same time and to be creative and to be diverse and bring different ideas to some marketplace of some sort. I also think we need to pay a lot more attention to externalities. The environmental impact harms, if they're unquantified, then people aren't responsible for addressing them.

There's this tragedy of the commons issue. So I think measures like carbon pricing that try to internalize externalities and allocate the consequence to the cost, I think that a wellbeing economy would probably lean in more there... For example, we have something called the G15+ in Quebec, which is a set of measures not unlike the quality of life indicators, but they have a really interesting one, energy productivity. It's really about how effectively are you growing your economy, how efficiently in terms of resources, in terms of emissions, which I think is really important in terms of signaling a direction of change.

Ashley Hopkinson: My last question is around social solidarity. Quality of Life seems to encompass all of those factors that you named earlier like cost of living and housing. You mentioned poverty reduction for certain groups and I thought of the human tendency to say “what about me?” Can data measure social solidarity and community cohesiveness, especially in these polarizing times?

Kari Wolanksi: We're at the infancy of exploring that problem or that area, but we have an actual proposal on the table. So we have an actual strategy for measuring. It's not exactly social solidarity, it is about measuring social cohesion. It's particularly about the strength between group connections.... But I think your point is a bit bigger than that in terms of the social solidarity, this idea that people are in it together. It's interesting to think of Quebec, they have a ministry of social solidarity (The Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Solidarity.) It's more part of the language. You know, how in different languages, different words or different frames rise up.

The other context that I think about is employment insurance. So we have mandatory contributory employment insurance. And so when I used to work in employment insurance policy, people wrote (the department) letters... and it would be along the lines of why do I have to pay for these other people? Not quite that but we did have lines (in response to that) about how a social insurance scheme reflects pooled risk, so that should it be your turn, there would be this. It's interesting, this idea of are we at an ebb in our history where it is very fragmented. And I like the frame of social solidarity.... Social solidarity is not something we've thought about expressly in our measurement program, but I do think it's something worth thinking about.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you Kari.

Kari Wolanksi: I really appreciate you taking the time to connect.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*