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Demographic Differences in Life Dissatisfaction Among Adults: United States, 2021

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Abstract

Objective—Previous work has established life satisfaction as an important indicator of overall health and well-being. This report describes differences in life dissatisfaction by selected characteristics, grouped by family income.

Methods—Data from the 2021 National Health Interview Survey were used to examine the percentage of adults that were dissatisfied with life by selected demographic characteristics (age, sex, race and Hispanic origin, and nativity status [born in the United States or U.S. territory]), grouped by family income.

Results—In 2021, 4.8% of adults were dissatisfied with life. In general, analyses showed significant differences by all selected demographic characteristics among adults with incomes of less than 200% of the federal poverty level. Among this group, men, adults ages 45–64, White non-Hispanic adults, Black non-Hispanic adults, and adults born in the United States were more likely to be dissatisfied with life compared with their counterparts. No significant differences in life dissatisfaction by selected demographic characteristics among adults with incomes greater than 200% of the federal poverty level were observed.

Conclusion—This report presents estimates of life dissatisfaction among adults by demographic subgroups and family income. These results highlight the importance of monitoring life dissatisfaction among detailed subgroups grouped by income, in addition to the overall national estimate.

Keywords: life satisfaction • quality of life • subjective well-being • social determinants of health • National Health Interview Survey (NHIS)

Introduction

Subjective well-being is a concept that captures how people feel about and evaluate or assess their overall lives, and it reflects various elements, including personal health as well as other factors (such as life events, social interactions

and relationships, employment, and social and economic conditions) (1). Improving subjective well-being has been identified as a national priority by Healthy People 2030 (2,3), a federal initiative that sets data-driven objectives to improve health over the current decade. Well-being is central to the Healthy People 2030 vision,

and an indicator is included as a summary outcome measure to evaluate progress toward achieving Healthy People objectives.

A key measure of subjective well-being is satisfaction with life, as defined by one's view or experience (1). In 2021, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services added a question on life satisfaction to the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) to assess well-being in the United States and monitor change over time for the Healthy People initiative. Life satisfaction was last included in NHIS in 2001. Single-item measures have been found to provide a broad and reliable assessment of life satisfaction (4) and have been used in major surveys around the world (5).

Previous work suggests demographic differences in overall life satisfaction, although many such studies use data collected over 10 years ago. Higher levels of life satisfaction are reported by women compared with men (6), White non-Hispanic (subsequently, White) adults compared with Black non-Hispanic (subsequently, Black) and Hispanic adults (7), and among older immigrants compared with native-born people (8,9). Recent data from NHIS may provide additional understanding of the distribution of life satisfaction levels



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among these demographic groups, as well as potential patterns by age group.

Research has demonstrated links between satisfaction with life and physical health, morbidity, and mortality (9–12), especially among adults of low socioeconomic status (10). Studies have shown a positive association between income and life satisfaction (13,14); that is, people with higher incomes generally rate their satisfaction with life to be higher, while those with lower incomes generally rate their satisfaction to be lower (15–17). This often-replicated and robust finding has been observed particularly for evaluative well-being measures that look at general satisfaction with life as a whole—when people pause and reflect, as in a health survey—and recent research suggests higher life satisfaction is also evident at higher incomes for experienced well-being measures examining people’s feelings in the moment (14,18).

Given the potential demographic variation in life satisfaction and the existing link between income and life satisfaction, increased reporting of dissatisfaction with life in recent decades (19), and racial inequities in the prevalence of factors associated with dissatisfaction with life (17), it is important to understand the association of income with demographic differences in both life satisfaction and dissatisfaction. In addition, given that poor life satisfaction is linked to negative health outcomes, understanding the characteristics of those who are dissatisfied with their life can help to identify populations potentially at risk.

This report examines the percentage of adults ages 18 and older who report being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life by selected demographic characteristics, based on data from the 2021 NHIS. Because of the relationship between income and life satisfaction, the analyses of demographic differences are grouped by family income as a percentage of the federal poverty level (FPL).

Methods

Data source

Data from the 2021 NHIS were used for this analysis. NHIS is a nationally representative household survey of the civilian noninstitutionalized U.S. population. It is conducted continuously throughout the year by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). Interviews are typically conducted in respondents’ homes, but follow-ups to complete interviews may be conducted over the telephone. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviewing procedures were disrupted, and during 2021, 62.8% of the Sample Adult interviews were conducted at least partially by telephone (20). For more information about NHIS, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm>.

Measures

Dissatisfaction with life

Dissatisfaction with life was based on responses to the question, “In general, how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?”

Selected sociodemographic characteristics

Family income as a percentage of FPL—Based on FPL, which was calculated from family income in the previous calendar year and family size using the U.S. Census Bureau’s poverty thresholds (21). Family income was imputed when missing (22). A cut point of 200% FPL was used, which was about \$55,000 for a family of four in 2021.

Nativity status—Based on a “yes” response to the question, “Were you born in the United States or a U.S. territory?”

Race and Hispanic origin—Respondents were grouped into four categories: Asian non-Hispanic (subsequently, Asian), Black, White, and Hispanic. These categories were based on responses to two survey questions asking about race and Hispanic origin, where those characterized as Hispanic or Latino could be of any race or combination of races. People who reported unknown race or ethnicity or multiple races were

not reported due to small sample size but were included in the overall analysis and other sociodemographic subanalyses. Estimates for non-Hispanic adults of races other than White only, Black only, or Asian only, and those of multiple races, are not shown but are included in total estimates. Analyses were limited to the race and Hispanic-origin groups for which data were reliable and sufficiently powered to make group comparisons.

Statistical analyses

Percentages of life dissatisfaction were calculated by selected sociodemographic characteristics, grouped by family income. These estimates excluded unknown values from the denominators, and differences between percentages were assessed with two-sided pairwise tests at the 0.05 alpha level. Linear and quadratic trends by age group were evaluated using orthogonal polynomials.

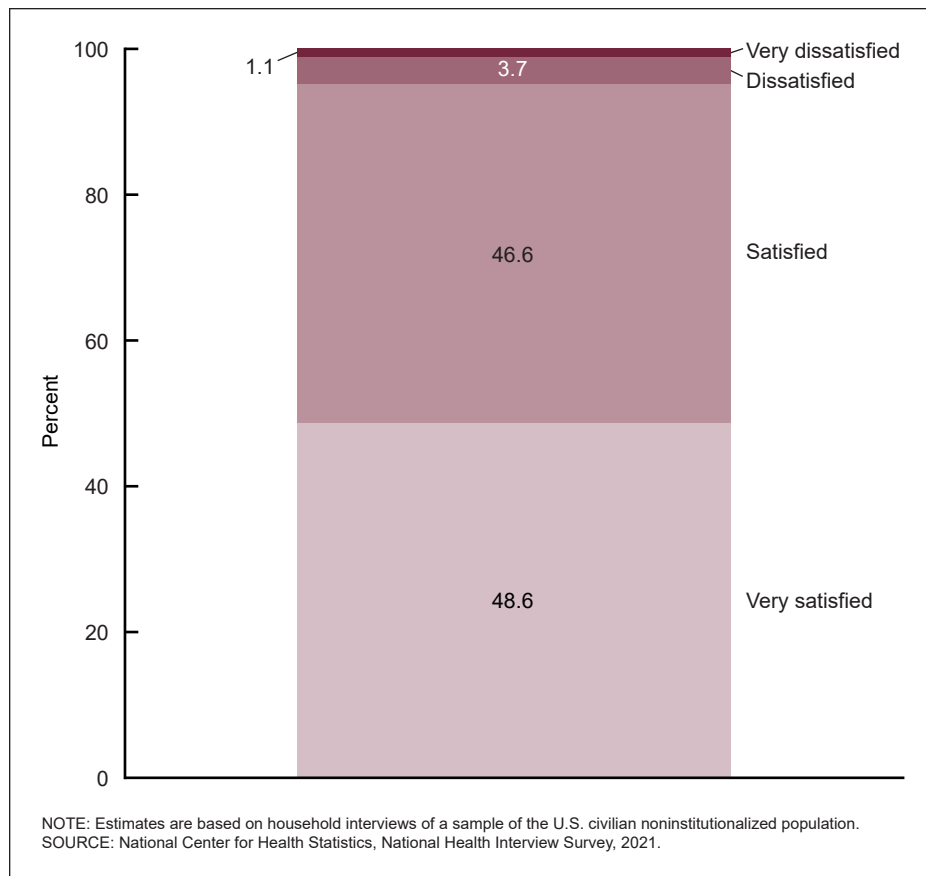
All estimates were weighted and calculated using SAS-callable SUDAAN software (23) to account for the complex sample design of NHIS. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals were generated using the Korn–Graubard method for complex surveys. All estimates meet NCHS data presentation standards for proportions (24).

Results

In 2021, 4.8% of all adults were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life, including 3.7% (confidence interval [CI]: 3.5–4.0) who were dissatisfied and 1.1% (CI: 1.0–1.2) who were very dissatisfied. In contrast, 95.2% of all adults were satisfied or very satisfied with life, including 46.6% (CI: 45.8–47.3) who were satisfied and 48.6% (CI: 47.8–49.4) who were very satisfied (Figure 1).

Among all adults, 5.1% (CI: 4.7–5.6) of men and 4.6% (CI: 4.2–5.0) of women were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life (Table). The percentage of adults that were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life varied by age group, from 4.4% (CI: 3.9–4.8) among adults ages 18–44 to 5.5% (CI: 5.0–6.0) among adults ages 45–64 and 4.8% (CI: 4.3–5.3) among adults ages 65 and older. Asian adults

Figure 1. Percent distribution of life satisfaction among adults ages 18 and older: United States, 2021



(3.1%, CI: 2.2–4.2) were less likely to be dissatisfied with life compared with Black (6.0%, CI: 5.0–7.0) and White (4.9%, CI: 4.5–5.3) adults. Black adults were also more likely to be dissatisfied than Hispanic (4.1%, CI: 3.4–4.9) and White adults. Adults born in the United States (5.0%, CI: 4.7–5.4) were more likely to be dissatisfied with life compared with adults born outside the United States (3.7%, CI: 3.1–4.4).

When grouped by income, feeling dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life was consistently more likely among adults with family incomes of less than 200% FPL. In 2021, 8.1% of adults with family incomes of less than 200% FPL, and 3.6% of adults with family incomes of 200% or more FPL were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life (Figure 2). Among adults with family incomes of less than 200% FPL, men were more likely to be dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life (9.3%) compared with women (7.2%). Among adults with family incomes of 200% or more FPL, this percentage was similar for men (3.8%) and women (3.4%).

Table. Percentage of adults ages 18 and older who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life, by selected sociodemographic characteristics overall and by family income: United States, 2021

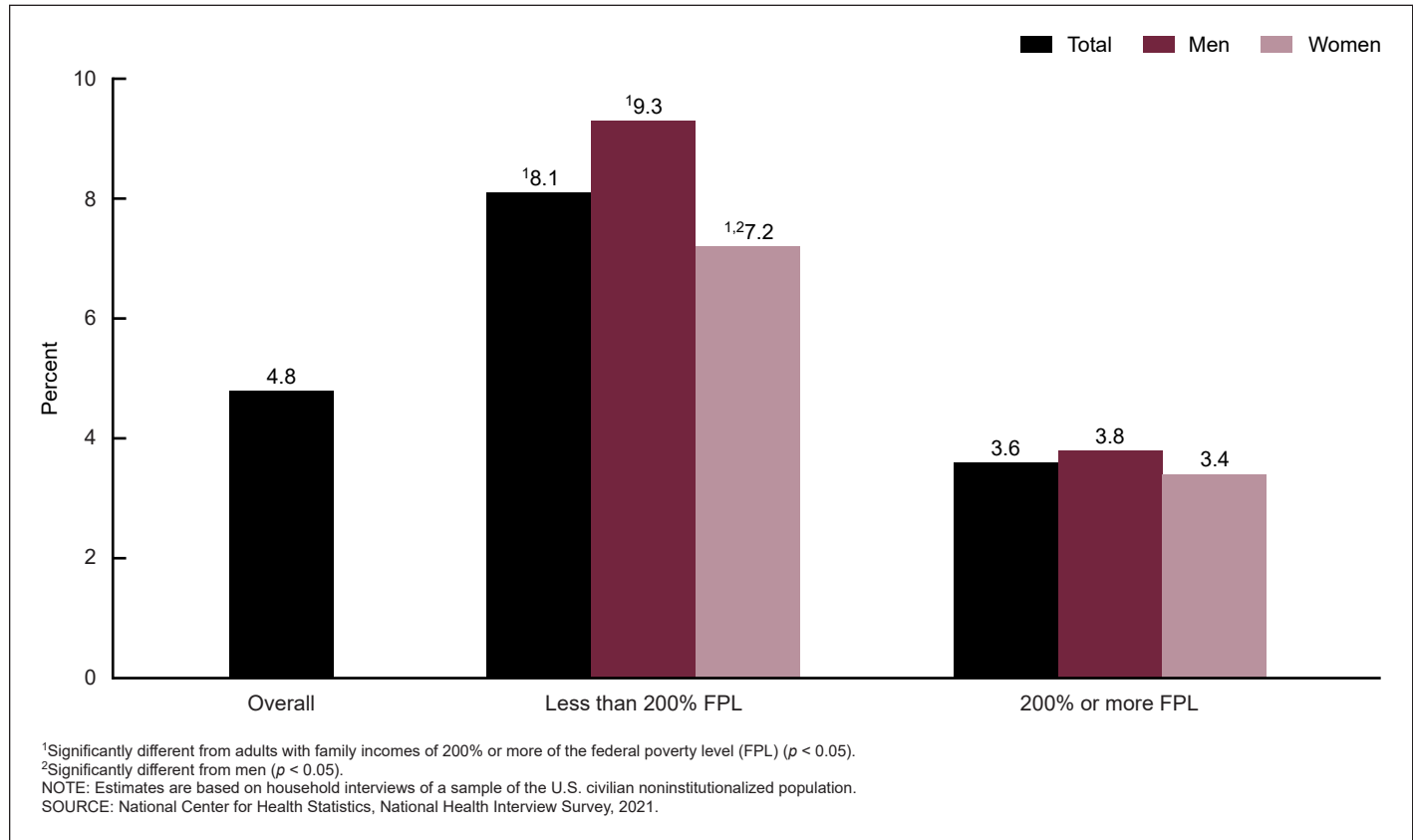
Characteristic	Overall	Percent (95% confidence interval)	
		Less than 200% FPL	200% or more FPL
Total	4.8 (4.5–5.1)	8.1 (7.4–8.9)	3.6 (3.3–3.9)
Sex			
Men	5.1 (4.7–5.6)	¹ 9.3 (8.1–10.6)	3.8 (3.3–4.2)
Women	4.6 (4.2–5.0)	7.2 (6.3–8.1)	3.4 (3.0–3.9)
Age group			
18–44	² 4.4 (3.9–4.8)	² 6.8 (5.8–8.0)	3.3 (2.8–3.8)
45–64	5.5 (5.0–6.0)	11.1 (9.6–12.7)	3.8 (3.3–4.4)
65 and older	4.8 (4.3–5.3)	7.2 (6.1–8.5)	3.9 (3.3–4.5)
Race and Hispanic origin			
Asian, non-Hispanic	^{3,4} 3.1 (2.2–4.2)	^{3,4} 4.7 (2.5–7.9)	2.6 (1.6–4.0)
Black, non-Hispanic	^{3,5} 6.0 (5.0–7.0)	9.0 (7.2–11.0)	3.8 (2.7–5.1)
White, non-Hispanic	4.9 (4.5–5.3)	9.7 (8.6–10.8)	3.7 (3.4–4.1)
Hispanic	³ 4.1 (3.4–4.9)	^{3,4,5} 5.0 (3.9–6.3)	3.4 (2.5–4.4)
Nativity status			
U.S.-born	⁶ 5.0 (4.7–5.4)	⁶ 9.2 (8.4–10.2)	3.6 (3.3–4.0)
Born outside United States	3.7 (3.1–4.4)	4.7 (3.5–6.0)	3.2 (2.4–4.0)

¹Significantly different from women ($p < 0.05$).
²Significant quadratic trend by age group ($p < 0.05$).
³Significantly different from White non-Hispanic adults ($p < 0.05$).
⁴Significantly different from Black non-Hispanic adults ($p < 0.05$).
⁵Significantly different from Hispanic adults ($p < 0.05$).
⁶Significantly different from adults born outside the United States ($p < 0.05$).

NOTES: FPL is federal poverty level. Estimates are based on household interviews of a sample of the U.S. civilian noninstitutionalized population. Chi-squared tests show significant differences between adults that were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life who had family incomes of less than 200% FPL and 200% or more FPL ($p < 0.05$).

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey, 2021.

Figure 2. Percentage of adults ages 18 and older who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life, by sex and family income: United States, 2021



Among adults with family incomes of less than 200% FPL, the percentage of adults who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life varied by age, from 6.8% among adults ages 18–44, to 11.1% for ages 45–64, and 7.2% for ages 65 and older (Figure 3). In contrast, among adults with family incomes of 200% or more FPL, the percentage of adults that were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life was similar by age (3.3% for ages 18–44, 3.8% for ages 45–64, and 3.9% for ages 65 and older).

Life dissatisfaction among adults with family incomes of less than 200% FPL was higher among White (9.7%) and Black (9.0%) adults compared with Hispanic (5.0%) or Asian (4.7%) adults (Figure 4). Among adults with family incomes of 200% or more FPL, the percentage of adults who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life was similar by race and Hispanic origin.

Among adults with family incomes of less than 200% FPL, the percentage of adults who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life was higher among U.S.-born adults (9.2%) compared with

adults born outside the United States (4.7%) (Figure 5). Among adults with family incomes of 200% or more FPL, the percentage of adults who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life was similar by nativity status (3.6% for those born in the United States and 3.2% for those born outside the United States).

Summary

In 2021, 4.8% of adults were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life. Adults with family incomes of less than 200% FPL were more likely to be dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life compared with adults with family incomes greater than 200% or more FPL. Among adults with family incomes of less than 200% FPL, additional differences were observed by sex, age group, race and Hispanic origin, and nativity status. Men, adults ages 45–64, White adults, Black adults, and adults born in the United States were more likely to report being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life compared with their counterparts. No differences were observed among

adults with family incomes of 200% or more FPL. This suggests that the overall differences in life dissatisfaction by these demographic characteristics are largely driven by people with lower incomes.

This report aligns with previous research noting associations between life dissatisfaction and socioeconomic disadvantage (14,25). It is also consistent with recent research that found a lower likelihood of dissatisfaction with life among Hispanic and Asian adults (26). Results by nativity status are also consistent with prior studies, which examined life satisfaction among non-U.S.-born Hispanic adults and immigrants from other racial and ethnic backgrounds compared with native-born adults (8,9). The findings in this report also confirm previous research, which has found a greater likelihood of dissatisfaction with life among Black adults compared with White adults (7,26).

This report demonstrates the importance of stratifying by income when examining life satisfaction as a national indicator of well-being. Although the percentage of life dissatisfaction is

Figure 3. Percentage of adults ages 18 and older who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life, by age group and family income: United States, 2021

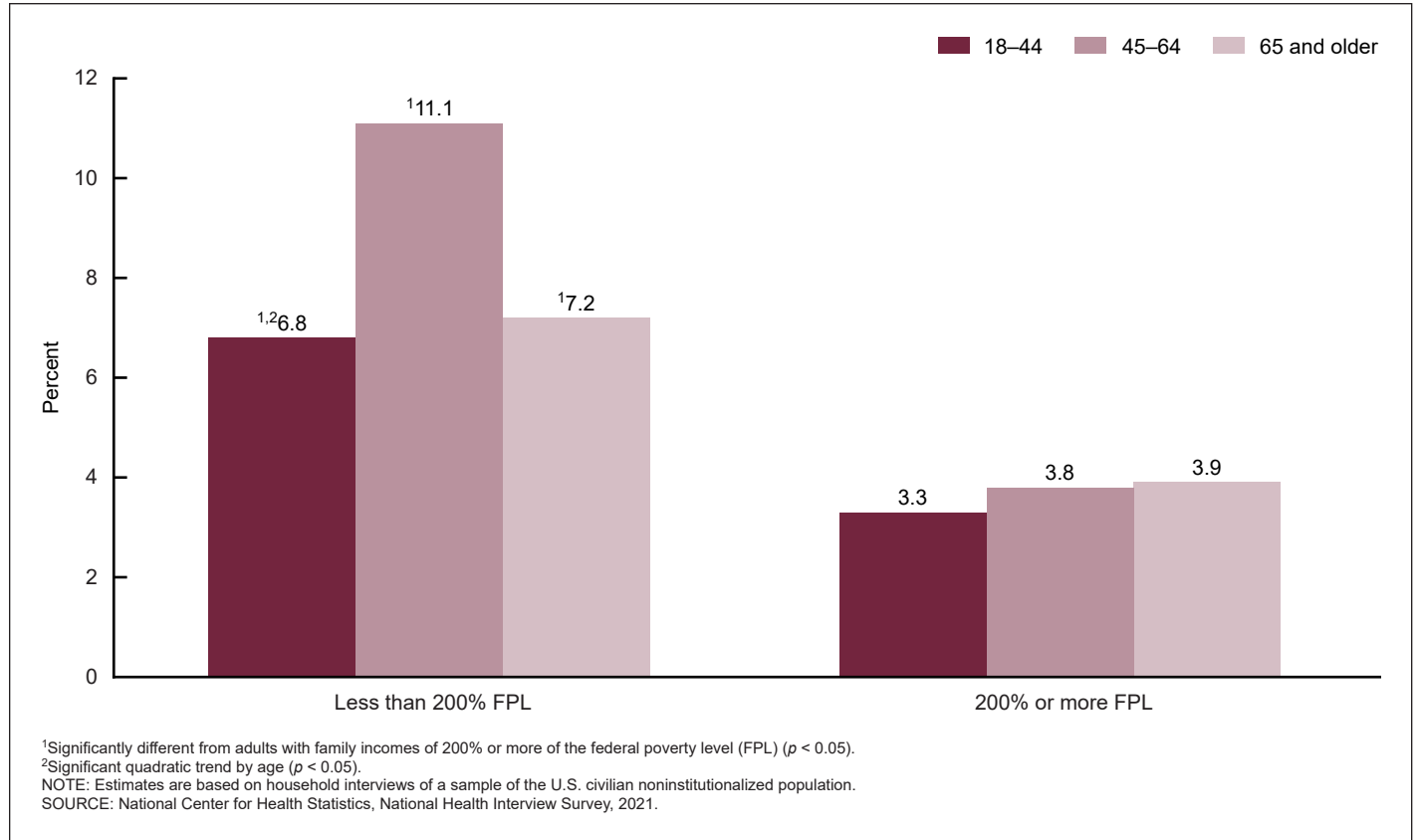


Figure 4. Percentage of adults ages 18 and older who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life, by race and Hispanic origin and family income: United States, 2021

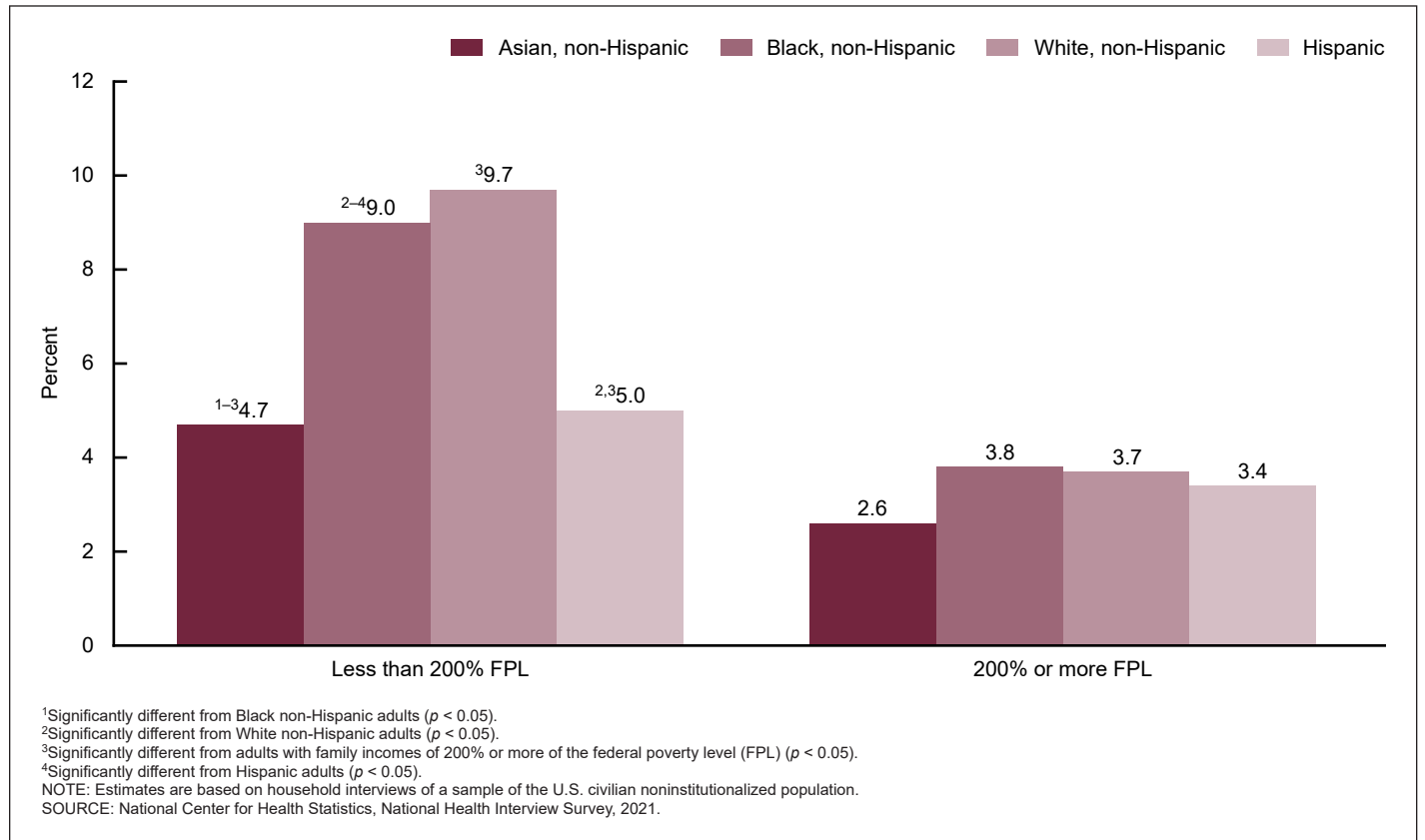
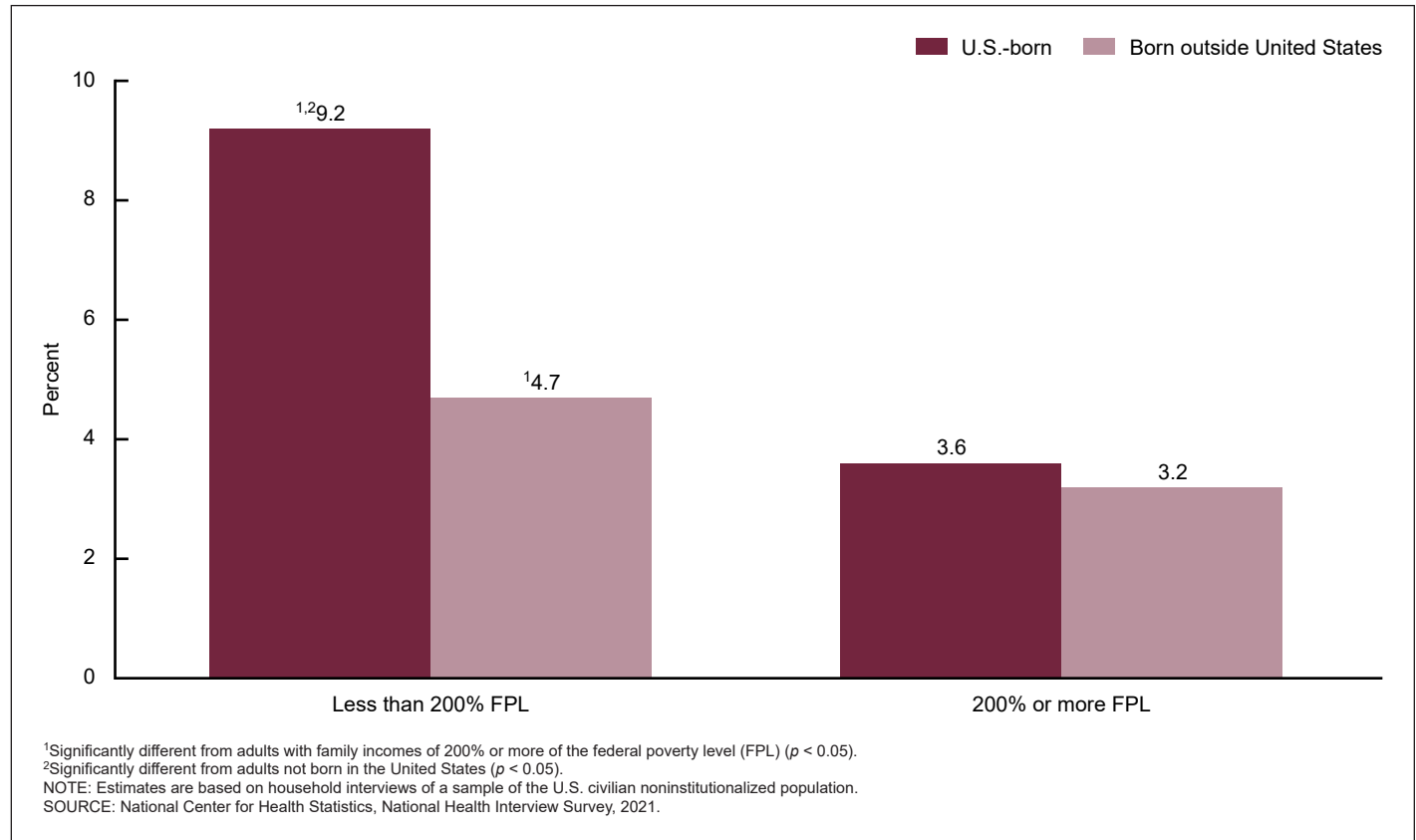


Figure 5. Percentage of adults ages 18 and older who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life, by nativity status and family income: United States, 2021



relatively low among the total adult population (4.8%), these results suggest that the prevalence of life dissatisfaction is higher among certain demographic subgroups of adults with lower incomes. For example, 11% of adults ages 45–64 with family incomes of less than 200% FPL were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life compared with 3% of adults of this age group with family incomes of 200% or more FPL. The inclusion of life satisfaction on the 2021 NHIS provides a population baseline of well-being, and its continued inclusion will allow documentation of progress toward the Healthy People 2030 goals of improving overall well-being and reducing disparities in well-being.

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