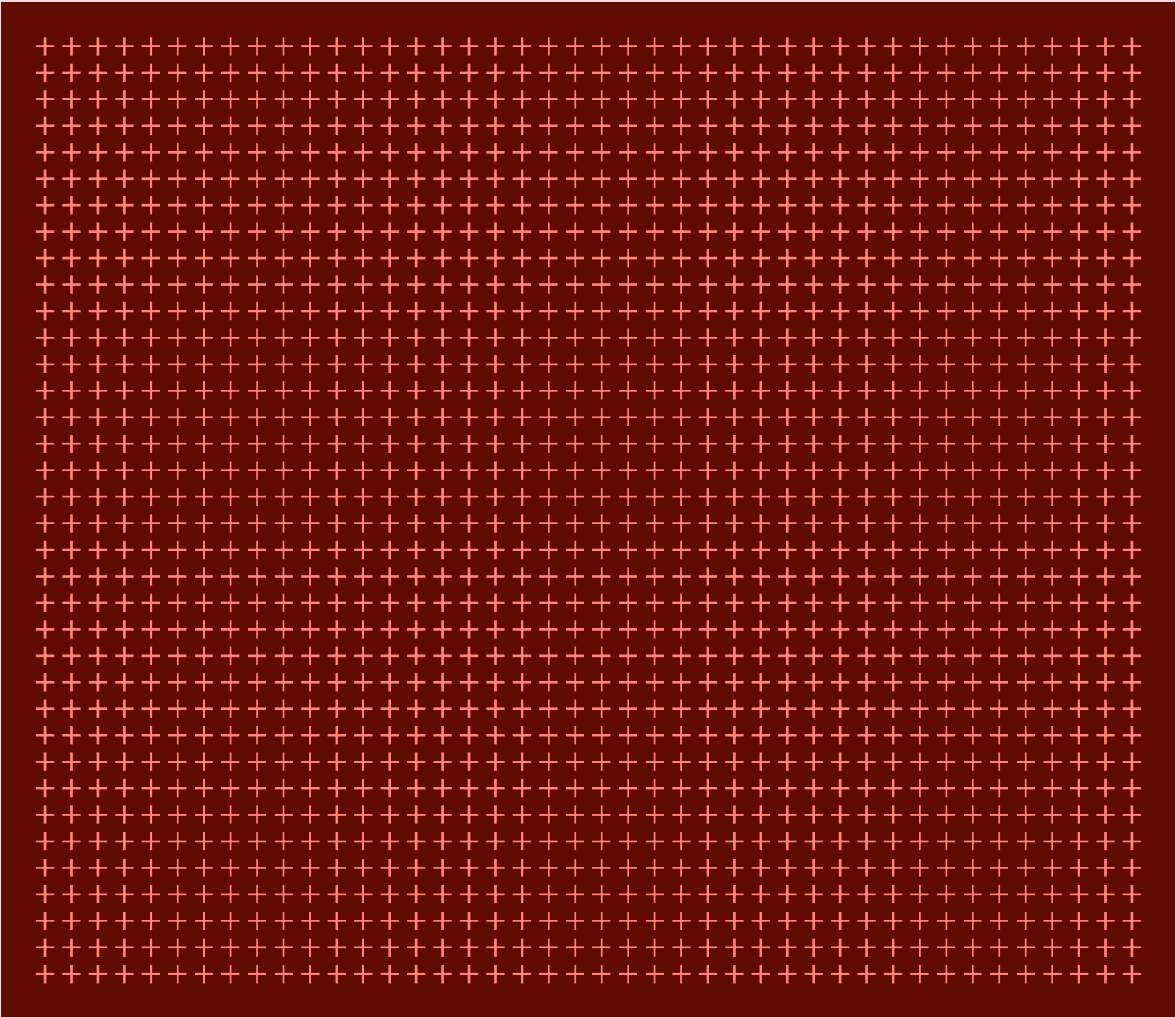


Lawyers’ Subjective Wellbeing in the National Context: Findings from the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census

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Legal Services
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Lawyers' Subjective Wellbeing in the National Context: Findings from the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census

Prof Nigel J Balmer, Anna J Scovelle, Tenielle Hagland

There is a growing focus on lawyer wellbeing globally, and within Australia. This research brief draws on standardised wellbeing measures included in the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census to explore subjective wellbeing in the Victorian legal profession, and to contrast their experience with that of the wider Australian population.

Measured on a like-for-like online basis, Victorian lawyers reported subjective wellbeing slightly above Australian adults as a whole. The profession's mean Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) score of 70.6 was 2.7 points above the national online mean of 67.9. This indicates a better overall subjective wellbeing, although this difference is below the threshold the national survey treats as meaningful. Across the 7 domains examined, the lawyers' wellbeing profile was close to the national one, with the clear exception of personal safety which was considerably higher for lawyers. Satisfaction with work, an item outside the index, was included given the occupational focus of the lawyer census. It was the lowest scoring domain and among the most variable.

Figures should be interpreted with some care. Subjective wellbeing (overall PWI score) is a broad measure and draws on much of life beyond work. An average near the national level is neither surprising nor indicative of an absence of problems. The main value of examining the PWI within the lawyer census is as a reference point. It provides a baseline that future lawyer census waves can be compared against, and a context for interpreting the lawyer census's more specific or complementary measures.

Among specific domains, low scoring satisfaction with work marks it as an area of concern. Reports from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census point to some of what sits behind this, specifically negative workplace experiences and cultures that are concentrated among some groups. So, while the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census indicates Victorian lawyers' subjective wellbeing is relatively consistent with the general population, it highlights that attention and intervention is most needed in lawyers' working lives.

Background and method

Interest in the concept and measurement of wellbeing has grown markedly over the past 2 decades across both research and policy.¹ The same is true within the legal sector, where a substantial literature on the wellbeing of lawyers has developed.² Recent research includes reports from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census,³ including analysis using a job demands-resources framework to model how workplace conditions and culture relate to psychological distress and burnout, and how these in turn relate to lawyers' subjective wellbeing.⁴ This work focused on the workplace determinants of wellbeing, but did not seek to place it in a broader context. The current report seeks to do something simpler and broader. Rather than modelling particular harms, it uses a single standardised index of overall subjective wellbeing to compare Victorian lawyers with Australian adults as a whole. This situates the profession by exploring domains of wellbeing and indicates where specific challenges may lie.

The Legal Services Research Centre measured subjective wellbeing among Victorian legal professionals in the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census, alongside a number of complementary measures including psychological distress (PHQ-4) and burnout (BAT4).

The PWI (Adult) measures satisfaction with 7 life domains: standard of living, health, achieving in life, personal relationships, personal safety, community connectedness, and future security. Each is rated from 0 to 10 and rescaled to 0 to 100, with an overall PWI score for their average. A single global life satisfaction (GLS) item is also commonly measured alongside the domains, although it is scored separately and sits outside the PWI.⁵ The lawyer census also included a satisfaction with work item that is not part of the PWI, but is of specific interest given the occupational focus of the lawyer census. For PWI items, scores were computed for respondents answering all 7 domains, which gave a weighted base of 1,448.⁶

1. On the broader growth of wellbeing measurement and policy see: OECD, *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being* (OECD Publishing, 2013); OECD, *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being* (2025 update) (OECD Publishing, 2025); Ed Diener, "Subjective Well-being: The Science of Happiness and a Proposal for a National Index," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 34–43; and Ed Diener et al., "National Accounts of Subjective Well-being," *American Psychologist* 70, no. 3 (2015): 234–242.
2. For a review of the literature see Lucinda Soon et al., "Towards a Context-specific Approach to Understanding Lawyers' Well-being: A Synthesis Review and Future Research Agenda," *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 31, no. 3 (2024): 550–573. See also International Bar Association Presidential Taskforce on Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession, *Mental Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: A Global Study* (International Bar Association, 2021).
3. See: Tenielle Hagland et al., *Wellbeing in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026); Alice C. King et al., *Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026); and Georgina Rychner et al., *Uncivil Behaviour in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census* (Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, 2026).
4. Hagland et al., *Wellbeing in the Legal Profession*.
5. The Personal Wellbeing Index and the GLS item are standardised measures of subjective wellbeing; their wording, scoring and administration are specified in International Wellbeing Group, *Personal Wellbeing Index Manual*, 6th edition, version 2. (Australian Centre on Quality of Life, 2024). GLS is a single item, 'How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?', which sits outside the index.
6. All figures from the lawyer census were weighted. The 7-domain scale was internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88) which means it can be used to measure the degree to which the 7 domain items move together as a single scale. It ranges from 0 to 1, with values from 0.80 to 0.90 conventionally regarded as good. The value here is consistent with the range in the manual reports for the PWI (see International Wellbeing Group, *Personal Wellbeing Index Manual*, 4–2).

Comparisons use the most recent national benchmark, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index Survey 42.⁷ This is the appropriate reference since it is the most recent and, like the lawyer census, was collected online.^{8/9} The report publishes national means for the index and each domain, but does not publish a standard deviation or a score distribution for the online series, so comparisons between the lawyer census and national figures are of means only.¹⁰

Findings

Overall wellbeing against the Australian benchmark

The weighted mean PWI score in the lawyer census was 71 (SD 16; 95% CI 70 to 71), compared to a national online mean of 68, a difference of 3 points. The most recent PWI report treats a difference of 5 points as the threshold for a meaningful difference¹¹, so while lawyers reported higher wellbeing, the overall difference falls below that threshold. Similarly, the single item GLS score was 73 (95% CI 72 to 74) among lawyers, 4 points above the national online figure of 69. These figures are also summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 – Personal Wellbeing Index, GLS and satisfaction with work in the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census and Australian adult population

Measure (0 to 100 scale)	Lawyer census mean (SD; 95% CI)	Australian adult mean ¹²
Personal Wellbeing Index (7 domains)	70.6 (15.7; 69.8 to 71.4)	67.9
Global life satisfaction (life as a whole)	72.8 (17.3; 71.9 to 73.7)	68.8

7. Georgie Frykberg et al., *Australian Unity Wellbeing Index: Survey 42: Australians’ Subjective Wellbeing Across Federal Electorates in 2025* (Deakin University, 2025).

8. The comparison is to the current national benchmark, which changed substantially in 2025 when the national survey moved online, the same mode used by the lawyer census. The benchmark is not comparable across survey modes. From 2001 to 2023 the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index was collected by telephone and returned a long-run PWI mean near 75 (See International Wellbeing Group, *Personal Wellbeing Index Manual*). In 2024 it ran phone and online surveys in parallel, and from 2025 it moved entirely online, mostly through the Life in Australia probability panel, returning a national PWI of 67.9 (See Frykberg et al., *Australian Unity Wellbeing Index*). The report attributes the drop mainly to mode, with respondents providing more positive answers to a telephone interviewer than when responding privately online, an effect it judges larger than any tendency for online panels to attract lower-wellbeing respondents (See Frykberg et al., *Australian Unity Wellbeing Index*, 14). Since the lawyer census is online, the online benchmark provides the like-for-like comparison, and the earlier telephone norm is not used.

9. Through the Life in Australia probability panel, which is also the vehicle for the forthcoming waves of the Legal Services Research Centre’s Legal Understanding and Lawyer Use (LULU) Survey, <https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/research-centre/what-we-do/research-projects/legal-understanding-and-lawyer-use-lulu>.

10. Comparisons carry the usual caveats. External validity depends on the lawyer census response rate and the representativeness of responding lawyers, with a technical report setting these out in detail forthcoming (although, as with the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census, the response rate was low which introduced potential bias in estimates). The national benchmark is drawn mainly from a probability panel and weighted to correct known departures from population norms (see Frykberg et al., *Australian Unity Wellbeing Index*). Within the lawyer census module, around a third of respondents did not complete the PWI block, which could introduce additional bias.

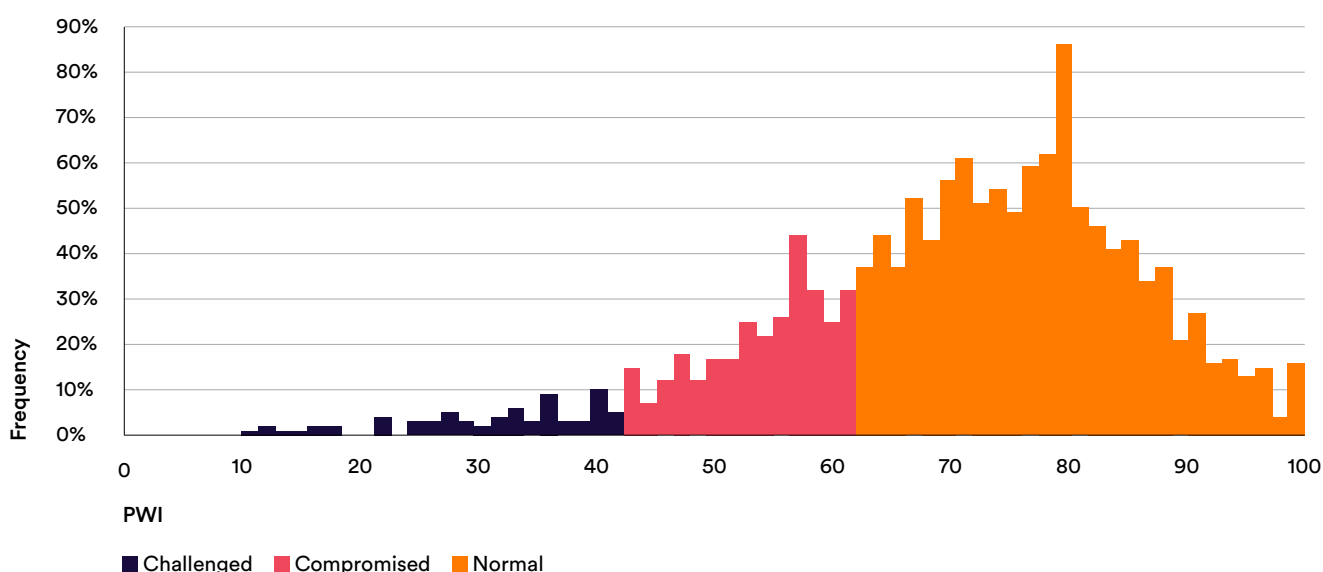
11. Frykberg et al. treat a difference of 5 points, about 0.3 standard deviations, as the threshold for a meaningful difference between groups (p 18).

12. Frykberg et al., *Australian Unity Wellbeing Index*.

Distribution of wellbeing scores and their interpretation

The distribution of weighted mean PWI scores in the lawyer census is shown in Figure 1. The PWI manual sets 3 wellbeing bands: scores from 70 to 100 are classified as 'normal'; scores from 50 to 69 are classified as 'compromised'; and scores from 0 to 50 are classified as 'challenged'. However, it is worth noting that these classifications were defined on telephone-era data, when the population averaged around 75, and the move online has lowered the national average to around 68. Shifting bands down accordingly gives an estimated online equivalent, with the 'normal' range spanning 63 to 100, the 'compromised' range spanning 43 to 62, and the 'challenged' range spanning 0 to 43. Note, the adjustment is approximate and no online-specific bands have been published.

Figure 1 – Distribution of mean Personal Wellbeing Index scores from the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census (n = 1,448). The distribution is grouped into approximate 'normal', 'compromised' and 'challenged' groups.



Read against these mode-adjusted bands, 74% of lawyers fall in the 'normal' range, 21% in the 'compromised' range, and 5% in the 'challenged' range. The comparable telephone-era figures for the general population, cut at the original bands, are approximately 70%, 25% and 5% respectively.

The domain profile

Table 2 shows scores for each domain that make up the PWI for lawyers and the Australian adult population. It also includes satisfaction with work, which was not part of the PWI, but was included in the lawyer census.

Table 2 – Personal Wellbeing Index domains and satisfaction with work in the 2026 Victorian Lawyer Census and Australian adult population

Domain	2026 Victorian Lawyer Census		2025 Australian adults	Difference in means
	Mean	SD	Mean	
Personal safety	81.3	19.0	67.9	+13.4
Achieving in life	67.5	20.3	64.5	+3.0
Community connectedness	67.3	22.9	64.5	+2.8
Future security	65.6	22.5	63.4	+2.2
Health	67.4	20.4	65.6	+1.8
Standard of living	75.3	17.7	76.2	-0.9
Personal relationships	69.6	20.5	70.9	-1.3
Satisfaction with work	65.2	23.0	Not part of the index, no national comparison	

Across the 7 domains the lawyer profile is close to the national one, with the exception of satisfaction with personal safety, which was markedly higher among lawyers. The remaining 6 domains are all within approximately 3 points of the national figures, with achieving in life, community connectedness, future security and health marginally higher. Standard of living and personal relationships were marginally lower.

Satisfaction with work, the item added for the lawyer census that sits outside of the index, had a mean of 65. As it has no national benchmark it cannot be judged high or low against the wider population. However, satisfaction with work was the lowest-scoring single item, below every PWI domain (see Table 2), and it also fell below both the PWI and GLS item (see Table 1).

Satisfaction with work was among the more variable measures (SD 23) with a standard deviation similar to community connectedness (23) and future security (22). A spread this wide means the average of 65 masks sharply divided experience. In other words, satisfaction with work is rated well above that figure by some lawyers and well below it by others.

Discussion

On a like-for-like online benchmark the profession's average wellbeing was slightly above the national level. As the margin was below the threshold the national report treats as meaningful, a simple summary is that Victorian lawyers responding to the lawyer census were broadly comparable to the online national population rather than being notably above it. Of the Victorian lawyer respondents, 74% reported 'normal' levels of wellbeing, according to approximate mode-adjusted bands. This is broadly consistent with the distribution reported for the general population (based on telephone data cut at the original bands). The domain profile (the elements that make up the PWI) was close to the national profile throughout, with personal safety being the one clear exception.

The value of the PWI is that it yields a single whole-of-life measure of how those in the profession are faring, a baseline for tracking across future lawyer census waves, and a gauge of whether specific pressures are severe enough to register in overall wellbeing. Its position near the national level suggests that, for most lawyers, those pressures have not carried through to impact their overall subjective wellbeing.

However, that value also comes with limitations, and a marginally more favourable headline subjective wellbeing among lawyers should not be mistaken for an absence of issues, for several reasons.

Average subjective wellbeing is a deliberately broad and stable measure. It draws on all of life (not work alone) and typically remains within a relatively narrow range and is steady over time.¹³ Averaging across domains means it can be a relatively blunt instrument for strain in any single part of life and can look unremarkable even where specific problems exist.

Another issue is that an average conceals distribution, and PWI (and GLS) scores were variable, with a mean sitting above a minority that scored considerably lower.

Finally, and most directly, the other modules of the lawyer census measure harms (in experience and culture) directly, finding they are neither rare in frequency nor minor in impact.

The 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census found that more than half of Victorian lawyers were experiencing some psychological distress and more than half were at risk of burnout, with distress and burnout concentrated among younger lawyers, women, LGBTIQ+ lawyers, and those with long-term health conditions. This was driven independently by workplace conditions rather than by who lawyers are.¹⁴ A third of lawyers had experienced sexual harassment during their careers, a figure statistically unchanged since 2019, with those harassed in the past year reporting more than double the rate of severe psychological distress.¹⁵ More than 4 in 5 had experienced or witnessed uncivil behaviour in the previous year, and exposure was associated with markedly higher rates of anxiety and depression.¹⁶

13. See International Wellbeing Group, *Personal Wellbeing Index Manual*, which also indicates stability across major national events.

14. Hagland et al., *Wellbeing in the Legal Profession*.

15. King et al., *Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession*.

16. Rychner et al., *Uncivil Behaviour in the Legal Profession*.

Considering this 2025 evidence, a PWI close to the national level is not a sign that all is well, but a meaningful result in its own right. This was reinforced by the one measure that stood out within the profession's own profile: satisfaction with work was among the lowest-scoring and most variable items or domains. So, while overall wellbeing held near (or above) the national level, working life appeared to be the least satisfying part of it, and the part on which lawyers diverged most.

Companion reports from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census¹⁷ arrive at similar conclusions from the other direction. They explore negative workplace experiences and culture directly, and find harms that are neither rare in frequency nor minor in impact. Taken together, the results suggest that the distinctive issues involve working life and its culture, rather than overall wellbeing, which is broadly ordinary. Workplace conditions and culture are shaped by identifiable actors, representative bodies, regulators and law firms and organisations. They are positioned to drive change that would benefit the profession and, in turn, the quality of legal service the public receives.

17. See: Hagland et al., *Wellbeing in the Legal Profession*; King et al., *Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession*; Rychner et al., *Uncivil Behaviour in the Legal Profession*.

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