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The Perception of Security Threats in Lithuania: A Human Security Perspective[1]

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Abstract This article presents original research concerning subjective security and the perception of security threats in Lithuania. It is based on an analysis of data collected during qualitative interviews conducted in 2016 within the framework of a project titled *Subjective Security in Volatile Geopolitical Context: Traits, Factors, and Individual Strategies*. The investigation resides upon individual-based human security theory, and it addresses the threats that individuals consider to be important, as well as the ways in which various perceptions of security form within society.

Keywords Subjective Security; Security Threats, Lithuania; Qualitative Interviews

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The social sciences long regarded security as primarily international security, and states were considered to be the primary actors in this regard. Certain new conceptions of security took shape after the end of the Cold War, however, with an important theoretical change being introduced by the *Human Development Report* that was published by the United Nations in 1994. This report declared that "human security is not a concern with weapons—it is a concern with human life and dignity," arguing that "human security is people-centered" since people, not nation states, comprise the major referent of security (*Human Development Report* 1994:22-23).

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This new approach to security placed individuals and the issues of daily life at the center of concern. It advocated a broad perception of security that does not focus solely on international military security insofar as it includes such other security issues as natural disasters, pandemics, famine, genocide, neighborhood safety, human rights, energy security, and cyber security.

Security is a basic need of human beings, and it comprises a key element of individual well-being. Abraham Maslow argues that physiological needs, such as the need for food, water, sleep, warmth, together with security needs, take precedence over other needs. Psychological needs, such as the need for love and belonging, esteem needs, such as the desire for prestige and a sense of accomplishment, and a need for self-fulfillment or self-actualization, can be satisfied only after basic physiological and security needs are satisfied (Maslow 1943). We may thus say that the provision of individual security is a fundamental issue for the development of society.

Security is both objective and subjective, that is, it is both a reality and a feeling or perception. Objective security is understood as a state of being free from threats and danger, while subjective security is seen as a state of feeling secure and free from fear and anxiety. This distinction indicates that the images of security in people's minds do not always correspond to objective reality, and that people may feel insecure in objectively secure situations and feel secure in objectively insecure environments. As Buzan (2009:50) states,

> the referent threats (danger and doubt) are very vague, and the subjective feeling of safety or confidence has no necessary connections with actually being safe.

The following matrix displays the four variations of the interplay between objective and subjective security that are theoretically possible.

Figure 1. Variations of Interplay between Objective and Subjective Security.

Subjective Security \ Objective Security	Secure	Insecure
Secure	S/S	S/I
Insecure	I/S	I/I

Source: Self-elaboration.

The first option (S/S) is that an individual is both subjectively and objectively secure, such as an individual who is doing well economically and also feels secure in this regard. The second option (S/I) refers to a situation in which an individual is objectively insecure, but instead feels secure. A pertinent example would be an individual who lived next to the Krakatau volcano before it erupted, which seriously damaged or destroyed nearly 300 villages and towns. The third option (I/I) indicates that an individual is both subjectively and objectively insecure—he/she feels insecure and is in fact exposed to danger or risks. A relevant example would be an individual living in the lowlands near a river that experiences heavy flooding each spring—the individual feels insecure and is objectively insecure. The fourth option (I/S) defines an individual who feels insecure even though he/she is objectively secure. An example would be an individual who is afraid to go out at night even though the risk of criminal activity is very low and the area is objectively safe.

Subjective perceptions are based on the psychological belief that

> we see things objectively. When we look at the world, we tend to assume that we are seeing all that is truly significant in it and that what we are seeing is, in fact, pretty much the way it is. [Benforado and Hanson 2012:457]

Subjective perceptions of reality do not form independently, however, instead being socially constructed and shaped by mass-media. Gamson and colleagues (1992:374) argue in this regard that

> we walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which we receive these images is not neutral, but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. And the special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible.

For this reason, research concerning how such "images of the world" are formed in the minds of people, and how they relate to the "objective world," constitutes an important task for the social sciences. The present discussion comprises an attempt to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon by focusing on common S/I and I/S situations.

Although subjective security constitutes an important area in contemporary social research, it has received less scholarly attention than objective security. One reason for this is the predominance of state-based perceptions of security as a matter of international military arrangements, which has led to a neglect of individual-based security matters associated with everyday life. There is also a general tendency to devalue the importance of public attitudes towards security issues along with elite and media biases, including their persistent involvement with the art of social construction.

The majority of studies concerning subjective security focus on public perceptions of various risks, uncertainties, and threats. For example, much of the research conducted in the United States addresses subjective perceptions of the threat of nuclear war, terrorism, and concerns with energy and en-

vironmental security (Davis and Silver 2004; Jenkins-Smith 2006; Herron and Jenkins-Smith 2014). Attitudes towards security policies (Jenkins-Smith 2006), as well as the influence of perceptions of security on public policy (Huddy, Feldman, and Weber 2007), have also been investigated. Research in Israel has examined national security and military threats (Kimhi and Shamai 2006a; 2006b; Asher 1995; 2003), while research carried out in Europe has explored attitudes towards national security and defence (Saar Poll OÜ 2014). Migration as a threat to national security has also been addressed (Lahav and Courtemanche 2012), although this approach has been criticized as unethical and politicized and is considered to be ambiguous (Huysmans 2002).

The present article adds to existing studies on subjective security by presenting results obtained in the research project *Subjective Security in Volatile Geopolitical Context: Traits, Factors, and Individual Strategies*. This research, which focuses on the public perceptions and evaluations of security threats in contemporary Lithuania from the human security perspective, was conducted between 2014-2017 by the author and her colleagues at the Institute of Sociology, Lithuanian Social Research Centre, with support from the Research Council of Lithuania. It aims to explore the threats considered to be important in Lithuanian society today, why this is the case, how such perceptions relate to objective security, and the ways in which various perceptions of security form in society.

Methodological Remarks

30 semi-structured, qualitative, face-to-face interviews with people of differing demographic backgrounds were conducted in 2016. The respondents' age, gender, ethnic origin, occupation, and place of residence (village, town, capital) were taken into consideration so that our sample would reflect the largest possible social and demographical heterogeneity. 15 men and 15 women ranging from 21 to 78 years of age were interviewed in order to ensure that our respondents had different experiences in life. For example, the fact that a 21-year-old could never have lived in the Soviet Union might well mean that, generational differences aside, she or he has different perceptions than a 60-year-old who lived 35 years under Soviet occupation and 25 years in an independent Lithuania. Ethnic origin was another important factor when selecting respondents. Ethnic Lithuanians comprised 87% of the population in 2016, with ethnic Poles being the largest minority (5.6%) and ethnic Russians the second largest (4.7%) (*Statistics Lithuania* 2016). 10 of the 30 interviews were with representatives of ethnic minorities in order to obtain a larger variety of opinions, which could then be compared with the opinions of those representing the titular nation. The occupation of the respondents varied from manual workers (loader, factory worker, manicurist, turner, driver, cashier, and so forth) to qualified and highly qualified persons (such as teacher, businessman, lawyer, scientist, engineer, journalist). 2 respondents were unemployed for lengthy periods of time and 4 were retired. 12 respondents lived in the capital city, Vilnius, although the majority of them had moved there as adults; 6 respondents lived in villages; and the rest resided in towns. Excerpts from interviews presented in the text indicate the gender, age, and occupation of the respective respondent.

Where appropriate, insights garnered from the quantitative stage of our research are used in order to enrich the analysis by casting light on general tendencies. The quantitative data comes from a national representative survey (N=1,009) conducted in February 2016 within the framework of the project.

Security as an Ability to Control the Situation

The research findings indicate that perceptions of security depend greatly on individuals' belief that they are able to view events objectively, control the situation, and ensure their security by their own personal decisions.[2] In addition, people tend to perceive their security as something associated with the way of life they have chosen.

> I always make sure to be careful…I have enough sense, I know where to cross the street, I know where it's safe to ride my bike. I also try to warn others if there's an opportunity to help…At my age, I try to think less about all the bad things out there so that I might live longer. I don't want them to eat away at me. [female 74, retired kindergarten teacher][3]

> You shouldn't…do things that could provoke not feeling safe, so if you live a normal life, you feel pretty safe. [male 77, retired teacher]

The data reveal that a majority of respondents acknowledge their personal responsibility for being secure, along with the conviction that it is possible to ensure one's security by taking certain decisions, such as choosing to live in a district considered to be safe.

> You take that into consideration when you choose where to live. Not somewhere near the main train station, where there's a high crime rate, but somewhere quieter. [female 32, journalist]

Walking at night, particularly in places considered to be dangerous, also poses a great risk. Respondents state that avoiding such situations will make one feel secure.

> No one else will look after you except yourself, so you just have to be careful, perhaps avoid certain places. [female 21, student]

> Once it gets dark I don't plan anything and don't go outside. [female 78, retired municipal clerk]

Choosing one's friends and circle of acquaintances carefully is another important factor that should be taken into consideration.

> Friends, your surroundings, the people you talk to—after all, you choose whom to communicate with. You get a feeling for who might be out to do you harm [and you avoid them]. [female 32, journalist]

The ability to control the situation is perceived as an important component of security in certain other contexts as well. Some respondents regard a large personal space and being independent from others as a crucial element of individual security. Lithuanians traditionally value land and home ownership.

[2] There is no difference between "safety" and "security" in Lithuanian. The same word, *saugumas*, refers to both.

[3] All translations of interview material are by the author.

The feeling of security associated with owning a detached house surrounded by land is succinctly expressed by one of the respondents, who remarks that

> When you have more space, you…are independent from your upstairs and downstairs neighbors…That's one of those elements of security that makes you have a greater personal space. [male 38, businessman]

Another respondent listed the following basic security needs:

> [I'm] safe…We don't have a war going on, everything is fine...We work, we live, we have a roof over our heads…It's calm, calm and quiet, we have enough to eat. [male 33, long-distance driver]

A group of middle-class respondents with post-material values highlighted the importance of ecological food and a clean environment. For example,

> You can't grow your own vegetables, you don't have time and it's just what you can get from the shops. So in that sense, security, well, what can I say...I have doubts about all those food products. Perhaps the quality does meet certain standards, but as to whether the food is good for our health, well, I doubt it…I think the question of food is also part of what makes us feel safe. [female 37, scientist]

The idea that it is not possible to control everything—such as the food you eat—makes some people feel less secure, although they understand that there are other things they can control and thus feel more secure. One example is automobiles. As one of the middle-class respondents remarked,

> What else creates safety? It's even the very type of transport you choose to drive…it has to be safe…technically sound…That's also one of the factors that give you that sense of stability and well-being. [female 32, journalist]

An important factor in feeling secure or insecure is thus associated with a perceived ability to control the situation. People tend to feel secure in situations that they are able to control, and they feel insecure in situations that are beyond their abilities to do so. One respondents clearly states in this regard that

> I in fact feel rather safe…I don't feel safe in those situations where I can't influence anything, where I can't change anything or do anything. [female 34, lawyer]

Stated otherwise, people feel stressed and insecure in situations where they are not sure what is happening and understand that reality cannot be controlled. A lack of information and awareness about particular situations or events also creates uncertainty and anxiety. As one of the respondents recalls,

> Three days ago I was talking with my mother after she had been awakened at night…A terrible noise and lights, the house shook and she was so afraid. She jumped out of bed, went to the window, and saw… some kind of military aircraft fly by very low in the countryside…People were talking about it the next morning and everyone was afraid. I would say that people do feel very unsafe in such cases because…if some kind of training exercise is going on, then the community should be informed…The community should be told…When you know why it's happening, then you feel safe, but when you don't know, then you

> start to feel uneasy…Information about the threat of war also provides a sort of impulse in that you're always ready, it might actually begin. So when that sort of exercise begins…and if you don't know, you wonder whether this is war or training. [female 32, journalist]

Being sure about the concerns of daily life is a key element in ensuring a feeling of security.

The Hierarchy of Perceived Security Threats

Our findings reveal that people perceive their security situationally. They feel most secure in their usual daily environments (family, friends, neighborhood), and tend to think that the further a given situation is from their immediate neighborhood, the less secure it is. As a rule, the proximity of a given environment to an individual's everyday life determines the level of perceived security. Our quantitative survey data indicate that 9 out of 10 respondents feel secure in the immediate neighborhood (family, relatives, friends); 8 out of 10 feel secure in their city, town, or village; 6 out of 10 feel secure in their country; 5 out of 10 feel secure in the European Union; and only 3 out of 10 feel secure in the world.

The qualitative interviews reveal similar tendencies. People tend to believe that "one's own environment is certainly the most secure"—at home, in familiar places, with familiar people.

> [I associate security] with my home. When I have a place to come back to, I immediately feel secure. And with people I know, people I know really well. I wouldn't say that I feel very insecure in unfamiliar places. But, places you know, streets you know, if you're talking about cities, then it really is much more enjoyable to walk along familiar streets than unfamiliar ones in the middle of the night. [female 21, student]

The village or city where one lives is considered to be quite a safe place in comparison to environments outside Lithuania. The least safe places are "far away," where "terrorist attacks happen" and "people are afraid to leave their houses because the migrants have brought chaos" (female 34, lawyer). In general, people tend to think that it is much more secure in Lithuania than elsewhere in Europe or in the world.

> If you take what's going on around the world, then it doesn't seem to be very safe. But, so far there haven't been any acts of terror here. [male 53, factory worker]

> Lithuania is safe, but on a global scale, then, yes, everyone is a little unsure about security…[T]ravelling abroad has become...[a little scary]. [female 37, scientist]

> Lithuania has never been as safe as it is today in its entire history…This is a very safe place…There are more tourists coming to Lithuania because they don't feel so safe travelling to, for example, France, so they come here. [male 42, linguist]

Others nonetheless admit that no place is safe because terrorism can in fact happen anywhere.

> All of Europe is no longer safe because, well, terrorism, I think it can happen anywhere. Anywhere. In that sense, well, I think Lithuania is no exception. I think those sorts of things can happen even here. [female 34, lawyer]

> Something can happen anytime and anywhere, so you always have to look after yourself and always think about those things in advance…You won't feel completely safe anywhere, even going out to dinner you can't be sure that you'll really come home safely. [female 21, student]

> When you look at the migrants and everything else, I can't say that I feel very calm. And when you think along those lines, then ultimately, there are not just fanatics, but psychopaths as well. [female 57, municipal clerk]

> I don't understand the model itself, probably like the majority. How do they expect to filter out those five or one hundred extremists from among the several thousand? [male 38, businessman]

But, our respondents tend to believe that international terrorist attacks are hardly possible in Lithuania.

> Whatever the case may be, we are still a kind of provincial backwater in Europe, and terrorist acts usually aim to be...to create the most resonance from a minimal amount of harm…They'll usually do them in Paris, or London, or Berlin…There would be too little resonance here and too little...well, at least that's what I think, that there would be too little media coverage. Just one time, and that's it. If there was a bombing there, like there was in Paris, the news reached the whole world. [male 26, lab assistant]

The interviews also reveal that people take into consideration very different issues when describing their security. The list of perceived threats is typically associated with recent everyday experiences, as well as news accounts on social media and the mass media. As a rule, the interviewees first spoke about their own economic security and security in their immediate neighborhood, and addressed issues of international security only after they had discussed important matters in their daily lives, such as work-related issues, salaries, pensions, safety in the street, concern about their families, social services, and health.

Questions concerning economic security were raised in all of the interviews. A very large majority of those interviewed admitted that having a job and a stable income is crucial for being secure.

> We can talk about whatever you like, but if you don't have any money, you'll never feel secure…If your pockets are empty and you need to think about what to eat or how to send your kids to school. [male 38, businessman]

> When you have a roof over your head…you have a way of…providing for yourself and your family, you earn enough…you feel that's really a safe environment to live in. [male 42, linguist]

> In terms of money first of all...we don't feel safe because you never know when you'll be short…[T]he material side is weak, we really do feel helpless. [female 53, baby-sitter]

A job guarantees stability in life, and older people are particularly concerned about their job prospects.

> Losing your job is also terribly insecure. I feel terribly insecure because I already had one of those dismissal

> slips last year—I felt really insecure. [female 57, municipal clerk]

> I'm unemployed now. I'm at that age where not many places will take me. Besides my age, my health is no longer the best, so that...my concern now is finding work. Finding any kind of job, one that's not too complicated, not too hard, something. [male 60, unemployed]

Family and children were as important as having a job and an income. Parents emphasize that they are very concerned about their children's security.

> Fear comes from the feeling that your kids are still young, and who would raise them if something happened to you? So that's why you want some kind of security…You feel more concerned not just over your own safety, but your children's as well. [female 37, scientist]

When speaking of security concerns about their children, people mainly have in mind the various safety issues connected with daily life that they are unable to control because their children are on their own, such as when they are crossing a busy street or taking a bus to after-school activities. But, they are also concerned about international security in the sense that they worry about what would happen to their children if they were left alone in the world because something had happened to the parents.

Educational opportunities are also one of the important concerns of daily life. For example, one respondent observes that rural inhabitants do not have the same opportunities to develop their children's talents because not all rural schools provide after-school activities.

> Reaching those after-school activities in the rural areas…is more difficult for children…Those clubs…if they're not at school…there aren't any buses and…it ends up that the kids suffer…parents can't…educate them…[A] different kind of feeling of insecurity arises—over that kid's future. [male 38, businessman]

Health is another important issue of daily life. Many people, especially the elderly, have pointed to insecurity in connection with their access to medical care as one of their most serious concerns.

> The general clinic does not fill me with that kind of security. [female 57, municipal clerk]

> There are expenses, many...expensive services, a lot of…medicine because I'm not in very good health, so I need quite a lot of pharmaceuticals…The main prescription drugs are subsidized, most of them, but if you want to take vitamins to be healthier, or any of those other supplements, you need to spend more money. [male 77, retired teacher]

The physical environment is again mentioned in respect to traffic safety.

> I truly feel unsafe on the roads, even though I've been driving for many years. I'm not safe on the roads. Everywhere else, I think I feel safe. [female 37, scientist]

> Anything could happen—a car could run into you. [male 45, gardener]

Physical security is also linked to the possibility of natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, although our research indicates that the latter are not regarded as being very important.

> Well, all those tsunamis, all sorts of storms, [I'm] definitely not afraid of them. That's just…nature, and if they happen, then it must be fate. [female 25, manicurist]

Certain respondents did remark that natural disasters are a potential threat to their security.

> There was an earthquake in the Kaliningrad District, and we felt it here…If [that's so], then our [16 story] building, well of course it might collapse. Perhaps that's one reason not to feel safe. [male 60, unemployed]

> Sometimes you think, when you read all those portals, you find out how someone died from being bitten by a fly, then you think that danger could reach us even here. [male 36, engineer]

However, natural disasters seldom occur in Lithuania and people generally place no importance upon them as a threat to safety.

Attitude Formation

Our research indicates that a general feeling of security in daily life depends upon numerous issues associated with personal experiences, the known experiences of relatives and close friends, and the level of importance given to criminal activity and other news accounts in the media.

One specific group of people consisting primarily of the younger generation perceives security in terms of their own personal experience. They tend to feel secure because nothing bad has happened to them and assume that this will remain the case.

> I haven't been attacked by anyone...perhaps that's why I still go out at night, and...I really do feel safe. [female 25, manicurist]

> I couldn't say that I'm afraid of anything in particular…I trust myself completely and believe that I'm safe. [male 34, car mechanic]

> Financially and otherwise…I don't really think that anything bad could happen in the near future, whether it be economic, financial, or social unrest… There shouldn't be any of that ahead. [male 26, lab assistant]

Another group of people instead recall negative experiences in their lives or in the lives of people they know when they evaluate their general level of security. They tend to think that if a certain bad situation (theft, deception, robbery) happened once, then it might happen again. They assume that it is better to avoid places where they had negative experiences, take preventive measures, and be more careful in general.

> I haven't been mugged many times, but one time has really stuck in my mind. It happened in the suburb near the station, when I was still a student. And back then losing 50 Litas meant losing what I needed to live in Vilnius for a week. It made such an impact on me, and then that safety instinct appeared. Ever

> since then I'm really careful around places like that… and I look after my things. [female 32, journalist]

> I wouldn't say that I feel very safe…The number of times we've had to call the police, well, unfortunately, they've practically been no help at all. That's because we had an unpleasant experience a long time ago when [thieves] broke into our apartment…Now we have cameras installed in the apartment. So if you're talking about our home, now we feel a little safer. [female 57, municipal clerk]

Perhaps the most unusual case consists of those people who have not been the victims of any personal or property crime, but nevertheless believe that life in general is dangerous because every day they hear news about crimes being committed against people just like them.

> I read the newspapers, and sometimes...[people get mugged] even at 6 pm...A woman was mugged, her handbag was snatched, and she was punched. [female 78, retired municipal clerk]

> We see what's going on in Germany. When you watch the television, the news, well, as they say, they're afraid of going out at night because there are [migrants] everywhere. Going wild, causing havoc. [female 34, lawyer]

In general, such people trust the mass media and do not clearly distinguish between their own experiences and those of others they see in the news. Some do admit, however, that they understand the role of the mass media in shaping reality and try to critically evaluate it.

> The media induces…what's going on here. [male 60, unemployed]

> You need to filter what you read on the Internet, you can't read everything and believe everything. So you simply choose what you do and do not want to believe. I think knowing does gives you a sense of security and forces you to think. [female 21, student]

> Depending on how it's presented, that's what you are led to believe. [female 57, municipal clerk]

An important issue often mentioned in the interviews was the dominance of negative news in mass media, which creates a general feeling of insecurity. One respondent observed in this regard that

> When you turn on the TV…the main focus in our Lithuanian news is who killed whom—the crime update… And the most important thing, of course, is who blew up whom overseas, who killed whom, and so on. We won't get far with that sort of information. It means that people are immediately made to think negatively…We end up feeling even less safe. Even if it doesn't affect us directly, they still make us feel unsafe. They wear us down indirectly, but psychologically, because every time you turn on the TV, you wonder about what has happened today…But, to hear something about the theater, that someone staged a new production somewhere…that a project was done well somewhere, or something, we don't hear anything about that. Nothing at all. [male 38, businessman]

People thus view neither too much information, nor not enough as good for society. It is significant that they prefer to rely on primary sources of informa-

tion—people who witnessed something or people who know people who saw something—and try to make comparisons. An interesting example is provided by a respondent who recalls speaking with the cigarette smugglers who often crosses the Lithuanian-Russian border and relates how they told him that the Russian army is mobilized and in a state of constant readiness.

> The border [with Kaliningrad District], where the majority of contraband passes, they're often there, and they see that stuff there, and they bring back that information. They say that now, after the crisis in Ukraine began, all the [Russian] soldiers are positioned in their units. Everyone's mobile phones have been taken away, from an ordinary soldier to the team leader. It's practically only the higher ranked and high-ranking commanders who can leave the district. So you get that kind of information, but our politicians are talking about completely different things. [male 38, businessman]

It thus appears to be the case that the information gained from primary sources, even though it is impossible to check its accuracy, is trusted more than what politicians say or what is presented as news in the media.

On the other hand, people feel lost in information flows. They admit that it is very difficult to understand what is going on in the world because one will never have all the needed information.

> Whether it's the Russia-Ukraine crisis, or the Syrian crisis, the refugee crisis, however you look at it, at no point do we directly get all the information directly. We are only told enough to get a rough idea. We don't know the reasons for, nor the consequences of what might happen, what's really going on. [male 38, businessman]

Conclusion

This article analyzed perceptions of security threats in Lithuanian society that individuals consider to be important. Objective and subjective security are not the same, and, in theory, there are four possible combinations of the interplay between objective and subjective security. These are feeling secure in objectively secure situations; feeling secure in objectively insecure situations; feeling insecure in objectively insecure situations; and feeling insecure in objectively secure situations.

Our analysis found that perceptions of security depend to a great degree on the belief of individuals that they are able to view events objectively, take control of the situation, and ensure their security by their own personal decisions. The data also indicate that people feel stressed and insecure in situations in which they are uncertain about what is happening and understand that they cannot control reality. In addition, people feel most secure in their usual daily environments (family, friends, neighborhood), and they tend to think that the further a given situation is from their immediate neighborhood, the less secure it is. But, even though individuals acknowledge that they are exposed to many dangers in their everyday lives, they generally tend to be optimistic about the future. Data from the quantitative survey reveal that 9 out of 10 people feel happy, and that 7 out of 10 look forward to the future and believe they could survive difficult times. As one of the respondents stated, "you can't be afraid of everything, and you've got to keep on living" (male 37, small business proprietor).

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