



COMPARE: New Methods for Comparing Well-being of Older Europeans

Well-being of older age groups is at the top of the European policy agenda. New results show that well-being of the 50+ population varies substantially across European countries. This is apparent from self-assessments on satisfaction with income, jobs, health, the health care system, or satisfaction with life in general. Corrections for differences in response styles make a difference but do not change the conclusion that the various countries have different levels of well-being, and that the Scandinavian and Dutch 50+ are better off than their counterparts in Southern Europe, Poland, or the Czech Republic.

This is a summary of the preliminary analysis of new data collected through the COMPARE project, a Specific Targeted Research Project in the sixth framework programme of the European Commission. COMPARE deals with developing internationally comparable measures of several dimensions of well-being: health, work disability, job satisfaction or satisfaction with daily activities, income satisfaction, satisfaction with the health care system, satisfaction with social contacts, with influence on decisions made by politicians, and with “life in general.”

COMPARE exploits the tool of anchoring vignettes to increase comparability of subjective measures across cultures with different response styles. Anchoring vignettes are short descriptions of, e.g., the health or job characteristics of hypothetical persons. Respondents are asked to evaluate the hypothetical persons on the same scale on which they assess their own health or job. These evaluations can be used to make subjective self-assessments better comparable across countries or socio-economic groups. In cooperation with SHARE, the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, COMPARE has collected data in ten European countries.

A first and preliminary release of the new data is now available for analysis. At the final policy conference of the project in Brussels on September 22, COMPARE researchers will present the first results based upon these new data. These results give insight in many aspects of well-being of 50+ population in Europe.

Satisfaction with Life:

A popular survey question asked in many socio-economic surveys is: “how satisfied are you with your life in general?” summarizing subjective well-being in one simple question. This question was asked in the COMPARE countries, and respondents could choose between “very satisfied,” “satisfied,” “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” “dissatisfied,” or “very dissatisfied.” The answers suggest that the largest percentage of older people who are satisfied or very satisfied can be found in Denmark (more than 90%), whereas the lowest fraction is found in Italy (less than 70%). Using the vignettes as a tool to correct for differences in reporting styles changes the ranking of the countries, however. It appears, for example, that Danish people easily label someone as satisfied, while Italians label the same person as not so satisfied. Correcting for this and giving everyone, for example, the Italian response styles, shows that the Dutch and Swedish are the happiest among the countries considered – more than 95% of them would report to be satisfied or very satisfied using the Italian response

styles – whereas the Polish and particularly the Czech 50+ populations are the least happy (with percentages satisfied or very satisfied of about 60% and 55%, respectively).

Work disability:

Respondents in the age group 50-65 are asked whether they have a limitation in the amount or type of work they can do, with possible answers none, mild, moderate, severe or extreme. This question has been asked to the same people twice – in 2004 and 2006 or 2007. The Netherlands seems to have the lowest fraction with a work limitation (only 10% report a mild or worse limitation, compared to, for example, more than 20% in Germany and Sweden), but the Dutch respondents also less easily say that someone has a work limitation than the respondents in other countries. Accounting for this shows that work limitations in the Netherlands are not very different from those in the other countries considered.

Health:

Several domains of health are considered: mobility, pain, breathing, depression, memory skills, and sleep. The results vary by domain. Considering sleep, for example, one of the findings is that sleeping problems are less prevalent in Sweden than in Germany and the Netherlands. Vignette corrections for differences in reporting styles do not alter this conclusion. The analysis also shows an effect of education level: in all countries and before and after the vignette correction, the lower educated have more sleeping problems than the higher educated. This is in line with the common finding that the lower educated suffer more from mental health problems in general.

Satisfaction with the health care system:

Three aspects of the health care system are evaluated by the COMPARE respondents: waiting times for medical treatment, the conditions of the health facilities, and the way doctors and nurses communicate with their patients. There are huge differences in satisfaction with these aspects of the health care system across Europe. Poland and Italy score poorly on all three aspects. Belgium does quite well for waiting times and conditions of hospitals etc., but has a mediocre score on communication. For all three aspects, there is a positive relation between the average evaluation in a country and the government's spending on health care per person.

Satisfaction with income:

Reported satisfaction with household income in Poland is the lowest in all countries considered. Less than 30% of Polish families report that they are satisfied with their incomes, compared to, for example, 35% in France and almost 40% in the Czech Republic, and much higher percentages in some other countries like Denmark (80%) and the Netherlands (70%). In addition, the vignettes show that Polish households use optimistic scales and report a higher satisfaction level with a given income level. Correcting for this implies that they are even worse off than the raw data suggest.

Job satisfaction:

We do not find such huge differences in job satisfaction across the COMPARE countries. The proportion of respondents who are satisfied with their job varies from about 60% in France to somewhat more than 80% in Denmark and Sweden. Correcting for differences in response styles suggests that the French are not as far off as they report, while Swedish workers are most satisfied with their jobs.

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