

SHARE - Facing the Challenges of Ageing in Europe

Ageing in Europe

Ageing affects all of us, both as individuals and as societies. For individuals, ageing is an emotional topic because it affects us so profoundly. From the societal perspective, ageing is one of the megatrends in our century. This is particularly the case for Europe, which is already the continent with the highest proportion of older citizens. This population ageing process will continue for the biggest part of this century.

Population ageing is often seen as a plague, threatening our living standards. Indeed, there are formidable challenges to our social security and health care systems in providing care to both family and social institutions.

To live longer, however, also provides fascinating opportunity. The overlap of four generations is a novelty in human history and will provide the younger generation with more experiences to draw from. Modern technology and the increase of professions in which experience and management abilities are more important than physical strength will open new possibilities for older individuals to participate actively.

The European countries' different cultures, their specific historically grown societal structures and distinct public policy approaches all have an impact on the ageing process. Understanding this impact and the effects of ageing is an important task for researchers in economics, social sciences and public health in order to turn the challenges of population ageing in Europe into opportunities.



SHARE – the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe

SHARE sets up a database that delivers the full picture of the ageing process. It includes information on health, economic situation and both social and family networks of more than 45,000 individuals aged 50 or over. In order to grasp the dynamic character of the ageing process, these individuals are followed over time, i.e. they are interviewed every two years. SHARE thus responds to a Communication by the European Commission calling to “examine the possibility of establishing, in co-operation with Member States, a European Longitudinal Ageing Survey”.



*Map of countries participating in SHARE
(Waves 1-3)*

The first interviews were conducted in 2004 in eleven European countries, ranging from Scandinavia (Denmark and Sweden), through Central Europe (Austria, France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands) to the Mediterranean (Spain, Italy and Greece). In the meantime 3 waves of data have been collected and more countries have joined SHARE, namely the Czech Republic, Ireland, Israel and Poland, while Estonia, Hungary, Luxemburg, Portugal and Slovenia are scheduled to participate in the project's fourth wave in the years 2010-11.

To ensure cross-national comparability, rigorous procedural guidelines and programs are applied. SHARE is harmonized with the U.S. Health and Retirement Study (HRS) and the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), and studies in Japan, Korea, China and India follow the SHARE model.

The collected data on health include information on self-reported health, health conditions, physical and cognitive functioning, health behaviour, use of health care facilities and bio-markers like grip strength, body-mass index and peak flow. Moreover, psychological variables as psychological health, well-being and life satisfaction are also included. With regard to their economic situation, respondents are asked for their current work activity, job characteristics, opportunities to work past retirement age, sources and composition of current income, wealth and consumption, housing and education. Questions related to social support cover assistance within families, transfers of income and assets, social networks and volunteer activities.

Currently, more than 1.300 registered users are officially using the SHARE dataset and the number is constantly growing. Researchers may download the SHARE data free of charge from the project's website at <http://www.share-project.org>, which also provides a bibliography and some full text publications based on SHARE data.

Why is SHARE so important?

SHARE contributes directly to informing public policies, both in substance and by providing a much needed research tool. Its longitudinal, multidisciplinary and cross-nationally comparative approach is essential to analyse the long-term efficacy of welfare state interventions for example. Globalisation and population ageing exert large pressures on the European welfare state and necessitate reforms – especially of the labour markets, pension and

health care systems. Understanding employment at the age of 50-65 is crucial for coming closer to the realisation of the ambitious Lisbon and Stockholm employment targets.

Expanding the knowledge base by generating and evaluating comparable cross-national data on older people's current living conditions and their life histories provides a particularly large added value. There are two reasons why collecting data on a pan-European level is much more than the sum of its national parts. First, economic and social policy matters become more and more community matters due to the increasing personal and capital mobility, precipitating the adoption of common policies and common regulations such as the pension directive. Second, history has created an enormous diversity of institutions, policies and cultural norms, which caused significant variation in the health and financial circumstances of older people. Europe therefore represents a unique living laboratory, in which the various determinants of the current economic, health and socio-psychological state can be identified much easier than in the more homogeneous environment of a single country.

Exploiting this living European laboratory provides the ground for major scientific breakthrough. The insights gained from analysing and comparing the diversity of experiences will help European countries to be more effectively prepared for the continuing challenges to their welfare systems in an ageing society.

For more information on the project, please consult our website www.share-project.org or write an email to the SHARE team (share@mea.uni-mannheim.de).

