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THE SCL/PRB INDEX DESCRIBES THE WELL-BEING OF OLDER POPULATIONS IN 12 COUNTRIES

Global population aging is unprecedented in history and will have far-reaching consequences for the social, economic, and political landscapes of countries over the next several decades. Each country's response to population aging depends, in part, on how well the older population fares now and how well it is likely to fare in the future. But the range of economic, social and health factors that affect elderly well-being makes planning and responding to population aging difficult. Predicting the effect of national policies and programs on elderly well-being is also a challenge. An index of elderly well-being that is comparably measured across several countries can help with both these issues. This fact sheet introduces such an index—the SCL/PRB Index of Well-Being in Older Populations—developed by the Stanford Center on Longevity (SCL) and the Population Reference Bureau (PRB). The SCL/PRB Index summarizes the status of the elderly across multiple dimensions and allows for the possibility of comparing the well-being of older populations across countries with key differences in policies or programs targeting older people.

Dimensions of Well-Being

The SCL/PRB Index aids in assessing the overall well-being of older population groups of one country relative to others and in ascertaining which factors contribute to a country's relative standing. The index summarizes 12 key indicators of well-being in old age across four domains—material, physical, social, and emotional well-being domains:

- **Material well-being** captures the extent to which the older population may be able to meet their needs for basic goods such as food and shelter.

- **Physical and cognitive well-being** assesses the ability to perform basic activities of daily living and to live independently, with life expectancy as the most fundamental outcome at the population level.

- **Social engagement** measures involvement with family members, peers, community members, and local institutions to gauge the levels of social participation and the availability of social support. In addition to being associated with better health, these contribute to life satisfaction.

- **Emotional well-being** measures mental and psychological outlook. It is closely tied to both physical health and social support.

The SCL/PRB Index is an average of scores across the four domains listed above. Each domain consists of two to five indicators (see box).

Domains and Indicators

Material Well-Being

- Median household income per capita
- Percent not in absolute poverty

Physical and Cognitive Well-Being

- Percent with no disability
- Percent with no difficulty taking medications
- Percent able to walk a short distance
- Life expectancy at older ages (50, 65, 75)
- Percent not obese

Social Engagement

- Percent who participate in an economic or social activity such as employment, community organizations, social clubs, or volunteer work
- Percent in contact with at least one child

Emotional Well-Being

- Percent with no report of depression
- Suicide rate of older adults (recoded so that a lower suicide rate means a better outcome)
- Percent who are thriving

Constructing and Interpreting the Index

The SCL/PRB Index of Well-Being for Older Populations measures the current status of older adults in three age groups (50-64, 65-74, and 75 and older) for 12 countries, 11 European countries and the United States. The SCL/PRB project team constructed indicators mostly using data from the Health and Retirement Surveys (HRS) conducted in the United States and the Study of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). These are population-based surveys with comparable components relevant to the well-being of older populations.

The SCL/PRB Index summaries the status of older adults across 12 indicators in the four domains mentioned above. Each indicator score, domain score, and the composite index score is constructed so that a higher value means higher well-being. To produce indicator scores, each indicator is normalized as a percentage of the best observed value among all the countries studied and scaled from 0 to 100. Domain scores are an average of the scores for indicators within a domain. The SCL/PRB Index is an average of the domain scores.

Domain Scores. One can therefore interpret a domain score for any country as the average proximity to the best practice observed for the domain. Consider the physical well-being domain score for Americans ages 50 to 64, which is 91 (see figure). This means that 50-to-64-year-old Americans, on average, have 91 percent of the best practice observed for physical well-being among the study countries for this age group. Unless any of the countries measured score best on every indicator in a given domain, no individual country will achieve the best practice. The best practice is instead a goal toward which a country may strive to achieve.

Composite Index. The composite index summarizes well-being for each country across the dimensions considered. It is the average of all domain scores. For Americans ages 65 to 74, for example, the composite index of 88 (see figure) is interpreted as 88 percent of the best possible overall well-being observed among these countries for adults in this age group. The best possible well-being outcome is determined by the highest score, or best practice, observed for each of the 12 indicators included in the index. If any country were to have the highest score on every indicator, its composite index score would be 100. As the figure shows, Americans ages 65 to 74 fared well on

Distribution of Country Scores for SCL/PRB Index and Domains for Ages 65-74, 2004-2006
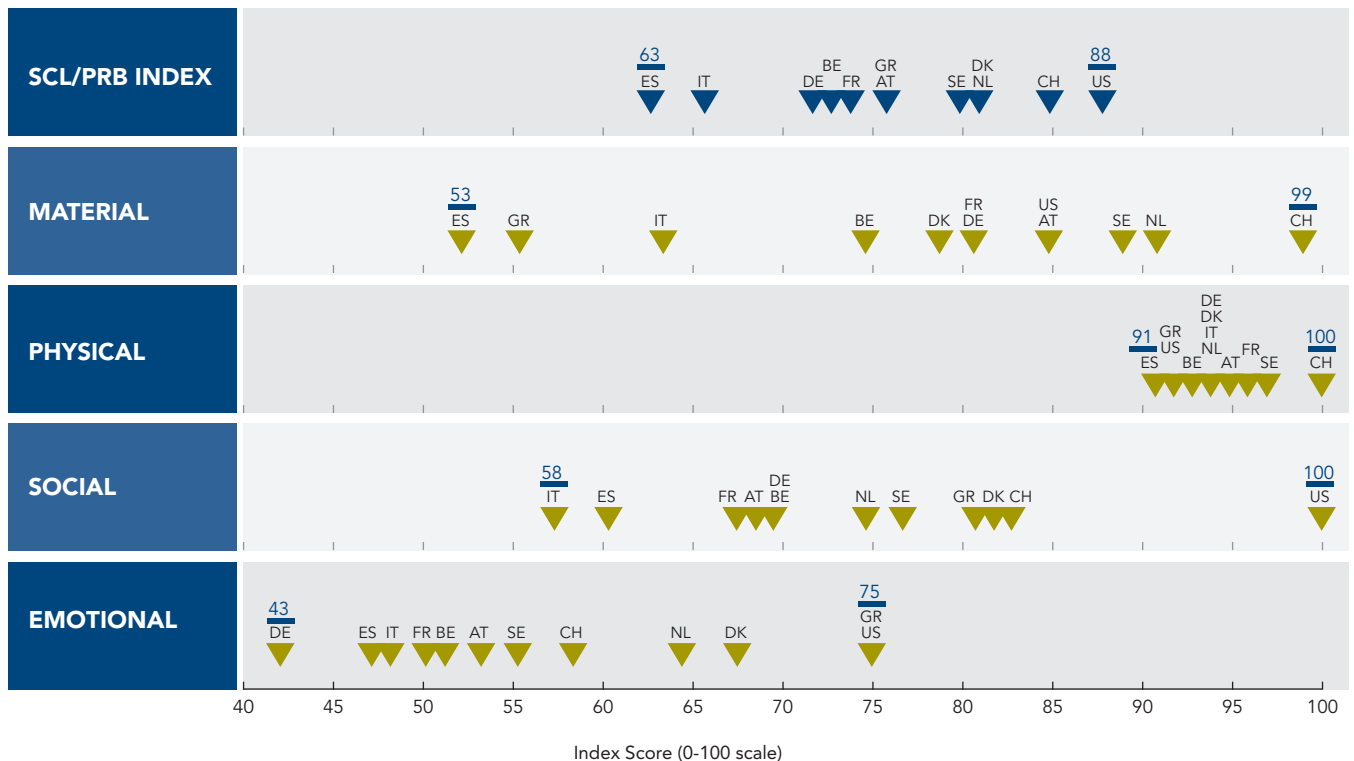
Notes: AT=Austria; BE=Belgium; DK=Denmark; FR=France; DE=Germany; GR=Greece; IT=Italy; NL=Netherlands; ES=Spain; SE=Sweden; CH=Switzerland; US=United States. The numbers at each end of the rows indicate the minimum and maximum scores in that domain.
Source: Population Reference Bureau.

most domains, compared with both other countries and with the maximum possible score.

An Important Index for Policy and Public Awareness

Assessing the overall well-being of older populations and identifying the factors that most depress and enhance well-being can raise public awareness and advance debate on critical issues surrounding population aging. Analysis of how the dimensions measured by the index contribute to overall well-being can also help governments and organizations prioritize resource allocation to assist the elderly and their families.

The SCL/PRB Index of Well-Being in Older Populations summarizes complex and interrelated facets of well-being in old age, thereby enabling decisionmakers to monitor the well-being of older populations across key dimensions. The index also facilitates cross-national comparisons, and careful comparisons across countries with different policies can provide insight into the effectiveness of policy options.

Acknowledgments

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