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SWITZERLAND'S INDEX: A CASE STUDY

As a means to assist decisionmakers in assessing the status of older populations, the Stanford Center on Longevity (SCL) and the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) have collaborated on creating the SCL/PRB Index of Well-Being in Older Populations. 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.

The SCL/PRB Index is an average of scores across the four domains listed above. Each domain consists of two to five indicators normalized as a percentage of the best observed value among all the countries—also called “best practice”—and scaled from 0 to 100. Domain scores are an average of the scores for indicators within a domain. In comparison to scores resulting from other index methodologies, benchmarking against the best practice produces results that are relatively easy to understand. To receive a score of 100 for the SCL/PRB Index, a country must have the best value on all 12 indicators. Because all the indicators are measured with respect to the “best” observed among these countries, a country's composite index may be interpreted as the average proximity to the best possible level of well-being. The SCL/PRB Index has been constructed for 12 countries (the United States and 11 European countries) and three age groups (ages 50 to 64, ages 65 to 74, and ages 75 and over).

How Are Older Swiss Faring?

With the index, data users can examine the status of a given country's older population. For example, Switzerland does quite well overall in terms of elderly well-being. For Swiss adults ages 65 to 74, the composite index score is 85 out of a possible 100 attainable if best practices were observed in Switzerland for all indicators measured. The

composite index is similarly high for the 50-to-64 age group but is slightly lower (81) for adults ages 75 and over. Of the 12 countries studied, Switzerland's composite index for the two oldest age groups is second only to the United States among the countries studied.

Behind the Composite Index Score

So on average, Switzerland's older population is doing well overall—both in terms of the best practices observed and compared with the other countries in the study. Looking beyond the composite index score, however, allows an assessment of the dimensions driving the overall results.

Using the results for adults ages 65 to 74 as an example, domain scores reveal that the 65-to-

Swiss Health Care System

While the health care system in Switzerland offers universal health coverage, it is also highly market-oriented. The system achieves universal health coverage through private insurance and regulated market competition.¹ The Swiss enjoy a high level of choice for patients, broad access to care, and low disparities in access. In terms of provider choice and the timely receipt of care, a World Health Organization (WHO) analysis ranks the Swiss system to be the second best after the U.S. system.² Although Switzerland's health care spending as a percentage of GDP is also the second highest (again, behind the United States), the level of spending is notably lower (11.3 percent vs. 15.3 percent, respectively). Mental health, however, is an area that has only recently received much attention in the Swiss health care system—despite having one of the highest suicide rates among industrialized countries. As a consequence, Health Promotion Switzerland, a leading national player in health promotion, considers mental health care a top priority.³

74-year-old Swiss perform exceptionally well on two of the four domains, but not quite as well on the other two domains (see figure). For this age group, the domain score of 100 on physical well-being means that Switzerland sets the standard across the five indicators in this domain. The material well-being domain score is almost as high, 99 percent. Despite ranking second on social engagement, Swiss adults ages 65 to 74 fare less well in this domain, with a domain score of 83. But it is emotional well-being that really drags down Switzerland's composite index score for this age group, with a domain score of only 59 percent for emotional well-being. Among the 12 countries, Switzerland has only the fifth-highest emotional well-being domain score for this age group.

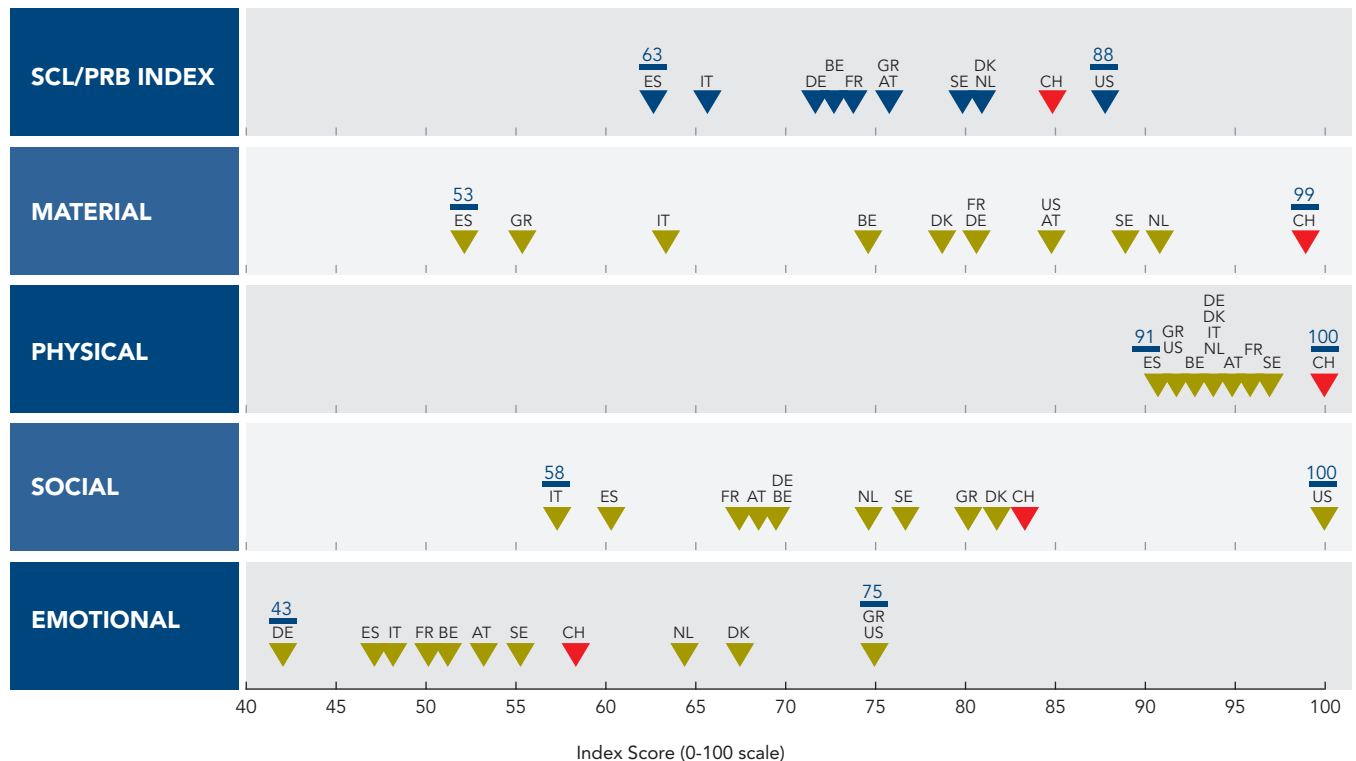
So what specific indicators are driving the domain scores for 65-to-74-year-old Swiss? Switzerland's physical well-being score of 100 results from setting the standard for that age group on four of the domain's five indicators. Similarly, the country's high material well-being score comes from achieving the highest per capita median household income and 98 percent of Sweden's benchmark level for the percentage not in absolute poverty. Lower scores on one indicator in each of the two remaining domains are the reasons that Swiss fare less well in these areas. In the social engagement domain,

Switzerland's relatively low score on social connectedness—the participation in activities such as employment, community organizations, or volunteer work (72 percent of the standard)—offsets its high score on contact with children (94 percent). And the reason for the country's low emotional well-being score can be tied to one measure: the high suicide rate among Swiss in this age group. Swiss adults ages 65 to 74 had just 18 percent of the top score on this measure, which weighs down the respectable achievements on the depression and life satisfaction measures (73 percent for percent not depressed and 86 percent for percent thriving). These findings likely reflect the impact of an array of both current and past social, economic, cultural, and political conditions in Switzerland. Reviewing the country's health care system (see box), for example, may provide some insights.

Examining the Larger Picture

Understanding how well a nation's older adults are faring is critical in assessing the significant challenges population aging poses, both today and in the coming decades. The SCL/PRB Index of Well-Being in Older Populations summarizes complex and multiple dimensions of well-being in old age. This is a useful tool for evaluating the overall level of

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.

elderly well-being and for cross-national comparisons. However, because no single country leads in all dimensions measured, looking only to the leaders in the composite index misses valuable lessons the index has to offer. The domain scores help identify areas requiring improvement for a country and the countries that might serve as models in those particular dimensions. Similarly, the indicator scores help pinpoint specific outcomes that decisionmakers might wish to target and also identifies which countries might have lessons to offer in making improvements on that particular measure. By highlighting the areas requiring the greatest attention for countries, the index can advance critical debate on important issues confronting nations as the world's population ages.

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- 3 World Health Organization, *The World Health Report 2000*.

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