

News roundup

## **People over 50 in northern Europe feel healthier than their southern counterparts**

*Brussels* Rory Watson

A European Union supported project has just produced the first continental survey of health, ageing, and retirement in Europe (SHARE). The findings of the three year programme are based on data on the life circumstances of some 22 000 people aged 50 and older in 11 European countries from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean. With Europe having the highest proportion of older people of any other continent, and the average age set to increase for many years to come, the survey is designed to give reliable information to researchers and policy makers in the areas of public health, economics, and social sciences. The SHARE project, which attracted funding from the European Commission, the US National Institute on Aging and several national agencies, was coordinated by the Research Institute for the Economics of Ageing at Mannheim University in Germany and involved 23 partners. Axel Börsch-Supan, the study's coordinator, said, "There is a clear north-south gradient in health and income. Older persons in the north are better off financially and are in better health, but this does not translate into corresponding mortality differences."

The over 50s in northern Europe are more likely to consider themselves in good health than those in the southern part of the continent. According to their subjective assessment, nearly 50% of Danish respondents and more than 40% of Swedes and Swiss consider themselves to be in very good or excellent health. The least healthy, in their own view, are the French, German, Italian, and Spanish elderly, with only some 20% saying that they are in very good or excellent health. (...)

The research compares healthcare expenditure with life expectancy. France, Sweden, and Switzerland are examples where both are high. In the United Kingdom, Greece, Austria, and Belgium both are low. Italy and Spain spend a smaller share of gross domestic product on health but have above average life expectancy. The reverse is true of the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark. The survey found a strong relationship between socioeconomic status and income, on the other hand, and physical and mental health on the other. People with low education levels tended to be 70% more likely to be

physically inactive and 50% more obese than their more educated counterparts. The health and psychological variables studied included self-reported health, physical functioning, cognitive functioning, health behavior, use of healthcare facilities, psychological health, wellbeing, and life satisfaction. The countries surveyed were chosen to give a geographical balance of the various regions in Europe. They ranged from Scandinavia (Sweden and Denmark) through central Europe (Austria, France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands) to the Mediterranean (Spain, Italy, and Greece). Further data are being collected on Israel.

*Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe* is available at [www.share-project.org](http://www.share-project.org),

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