

## The Individual and the Welfare State: Life Histories in Europe

### ***New SHARELIFE data foster the understanding of welfare state impacts on people's life***

Older people's health, income and social networks are the result of what happened over the course of a lifetime. A European's life today was shaped by individual decisions and external influences, such as welfare state policies in the past. As the population ages, the relationship between public policies and quality of life at older age needs to be better understood. The new SHARELIFE data are a major step forward in achieving this goal. 28,000 individual life histories from thirteen European countries provide a unique opportunity to answer the important public policy questions of our time:

*How does the welfare state affect people's incomes, families, retirement, health and well-being?*

The SHARELIFE database is available to the research community free of charge and allows researchers from around the globe to assess the manifold interrelations between the individual and the state. Like previous waves of SHARE, it will attract researchers from a wide array of fields such as economics, gerontology, history, political science, public health and sociology. First analyses by multidisciplinary teams show that key aspects of individual and family life still vary tremendously between North, South, East and West – as do European welfare state policies. Some snapshots of findings from SHARELIFE:

### ***...family, work and retirement***

In times of increasing life expectancy and tight pension funds a productive work-life into old age forms the backbone of the welfare state. Thus, policies were designed to enable individuals to return to work after a break and stay in work healthily into older age. SHARELIFE analyses show:

- Women were less likely to return into employment after having children and received lower retirement benefits if the welfare state provided higher maternity benefits.
- Older persons who have been working in high quality jobs were less likely to retire early. Countries with more training programs for older adults and higher expenditure on services for health recovery achieved higher work quality and continued employment into old age.

### ***...poverty, wealth and marital status***

The welfare state aims to prevent poverty at old age, yet differences in wealth remain. SHARELIFE finds:

- Poverty at older ages is related to poorer health and fewer social contacts – and until today, childhood poverty often translates into poverty later in life. However, interventions by the welfare state such as well-designed policies on social protection can weaken the link between early and later life poverty.
- Divorced women who remained single are less wealthy than their married counterparts. This holds across all of Europe. Thus, although women have grown more independent over the years, many of today's older women still depend on their husbands economically.

### *...health and health care*

Increasing life expectancy in Europe does not necessarily mean that people live longer in good health. SHARELIFE looks into individuals' health, preventive health care measures and their economic effects.

- The more doctors there are in a country, the more preventive health care such as eye tests or mammograms is performed. Furthermore, the higher a person's education, the more likely a person is to take part in preventive health care. Thus, public health policies to promote regular use of preventive health care services within and across European countries remain to be improved.
- Unemployment negatively affects the health of former employees even up to 40 years after they lost a job due to a company shut down. The welfare state can mediate these negative effects which are especially relevant in times of economic crises and high unemployment: Generous unemployment benefits greatly enhance the long-term health of Europeans, especially amongst women.

### *...persecution*

The generation 50+ in Europe was witness to major historical events, among them World War II and the rise and fall of Communist regimes. SHARELIFE documents the traumatic experiences of Europeans who survived these stressful events of the 20th Century.

- Especially in central Europe people experienced persecution with negative consequences for their health and careers. This places a particular responsibility on today's policy makers to support those still suffering the consequences of history, and underscores the importance of anti-discrimination policies.

More fascinating results and detailed analyses will be available in our book release "The Individual and the Welfare State: Life Histories in Europe" to be published by Springer in 2011. Ongoing research with SHARELIFE data will provide invaluable insights for evidence-based policy and tailored welfare reforms in Europe.

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