Executive Summary

Background and Objectives

In nearly all regions of the world, growth of the population ages 65 and older outpaces total population growth. This shift in the size of the elderly population relative to other age groups challenges existing health services, family relationships, social security, and pension programs. To identify changes associated with population aging and to assess the continuing effectiveness of national programs requires new tools. Evaluating how national government programs, cultural norms, and social and economic factors affect the well-being of the older adults at the national level often requires cross-national comparisons. To facilitate such analyses, the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) and the Global Aging Program at the Stanford Center on Longevity (SCL) have collaborated on creating the SCL/PRB Index of Well-Being in Older Populations, a summary measure of elderly well-being based on comparable cross-national data.

After review of a comprehensive set of well-being indicators for countries across the world, the study team focused on outcome indicators for which comparable data were available and on 12 study countries at similar levels of development—Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. The resulting Index focuses the discussion of elderly well-being on key outcomes and provides a user-friendly measure that summarizes multiple dimensions of elderly well-being. This Index may be used to assess the overall status of older populations and to make cross-country comparisons.

Index Methodology

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:

1. Material Well-Being
   - Median household income per capita ($PPP)
   - Percent not in absolute poverty

2. Physical Well-Being
   - Percent with no disability
   - Percent with no difficulty taking medications (living independently)
   - Percent with no difficulty walking a short distance (no functional limitations)
   - Life expectancy at older ages (50-54, 65-69, or 75-79 depending on the age group)
   - Percent not obese

3. Social Well-Being
   - Percent participating in an economic or social activity (socially connected)
   - Percent in contact with at least one child

4. Emotional Well-Being
   - Percent with no report of depression (non-clinical)
   - Suicide rate for older adults (reverse coded)
   - Percent thriving (satisfied with their current life and future prospects)

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. The U.S. score of 88 out of 100 for the 65-74 age group, which puts it at the top among these countries, suggests that even the top ranking countries have room for improvement.

The SCL/PRB Index is based almost entirely on data from surveys of non-institutionalized populations conducted between 2004 and 2006, the Health and Retirement Surveys (HRS) in the United States and the Study of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). The main components of the SHARE surveys were designed to be comparable with HRS. Using these data minimizes inconsistencies in cross-national measurements, but the sample sizes for each country varies substantially, ranging from about 1,000 for Switzerland to over 12,000 for the United States. To control for differences in age structure across countries, the Index measures the well-being of older populations in three age groups (50-64, 65-74, and 75+). This report discusses results for the 65-74 and 75+ populations, with limited reference to differences noted between these groups and the 50-64 group. Results for all three age groups are included in appended tables.

Results

The SCL/PRB Index allows us to assess the overall well-being of older population groups of one country relative to others and to identify which factors contribute to a country’s relative standing. Key findings include:

- Among this group of countries, the SCL/PRB Index ranks the well-being of U.S. adults ages 65-74 and 75+ as higher than other countries. This result is mostly due to high U.S. scores on social engagement and emotional well-being. High volunteerism and labor force attachment in the United States at older ages mean that the percentage of older Americans actively engaged in a social organization or employed far exceeds that of the next highest scoring country in the social well-being domain, Switzerland and Greece for age groups 65-74 and 75+, respectively.

- Other countries that consistently rank high in overall well-being for the 65-74 and 75+ age groups are Switzerland, Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden.

- Italy and Spain consistently occupy the bottom two spots in overall well-being for both age groups. On most indicators, these two countries have scores that place them in the bottom half of the countries in this study. Also, despite being considered countries with more traditional family systems, Italy and Spain score among the lowest on social well-being. For example, Italy ranks twelfth (last) on the percent of older adults who are socially connected for both age groups 65-74 and 75+.

- The standing of the countries studied here does not strictly reflect their wealth. In general, Greece’s older populations do surprisingly well given that Greece is more similar to Italy and Spain in wealth and educational attainment among its older population than to other countries in the study. Greece ranks sixth on overall well-being in the 65-74 age group and seventh in the 75+ age group. Greece’s strong performance is largely a result of its high scores in the social and emotional well-being domains.

- The Index goes beyond material well-being and country rankings reflect this. Germany ranks lower than expected given its level of material well-being. Germany ranks tenth in overall well-being for both the 65-74 and 75+ age groups.

- Although the United States is among the lowest ranked countries in the physical well-being domain for the 65-74 age group, the United States ranks second of twelve in this domain for the 75+ age group. This result stems from a more rapid increase in disability rates with age in other countries than observed for the United States. Cohort differences in obesity in the United States are notable—the 75+ age group has the highest rate of obesity.
In the United States, material well-being of 65-74 and 75+ adults is lower relative to the material well-being of the 50-64 age group. For the older age groups, the U.S. score represents a much lower percentage of the best practice, 85 and 86 percent vs. 94 percent for the 50-64 group. This result is largely because median household income per capita declines more rapidly with age in the United States than it does in Switzerland, the country with the highest median household income per capita in all three age groups.

Variation in country domain scores is smallest for physical well-being and is largest for material well-being. This is true for all age groups.

The SCL/PRB Index methodology is sensitive to countries having extreme values on any indicator (outliers), which the United States does in the social well-being domain. However, sensitivity analyses suggest that while the exact ranking of a country may change with the use of other methodologies designed to reduce the effect of outliers, the general position of countries remains the same. The United States would remain among the top countries, and Italy and Spain would remain ranked the lowest in overall well-being for older adults.

Our results demonstrate that countries have different advantages and face different challenges to improving the overall status of their older populations. No one country is best in every domain or on every indicator, suggesting that it is more helpful in policy and program planning to look at which factors are improving or detracting from a country’s relative standing than to be overly concerned with the Index scores and rankings based on these scores.

The SCL/PRB Index provides the first summary measure of the well-being for older populations comparable across countries. The Index has been developed primarily for cross-national comparisons and is based on data available when this analysis first got underway. The results presented here are based on data collected before the global economic recession and do not reflect changes in elderly well-being since 2007. The principles used in developing the Index have produced a robust set of results for these countries and may be extended to several other analyses, including monitoring trends in elderly well-being over time and comparing the well-being of different elderly subpopulations within the same country.

**Next Steps**

There are several possible extensions to advance the SCL/PRB Index. One extension is to assess the Index’s performance among a more culturally and socioeconomically diverse set of countries, both in Europe as well as in other regions. More and more comparative data is becoming available. For example, in Asia, surveys with content largely comparable to the HRS have already been conducted in South Korea and Japan and have been pre-tested in China. In Europe, data necessary to create the Index are now available for nine additional countries, including Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. To include more countries will require further data harmonization efforts across countries, including careful attention to how survey samples are drawn and the populations that they represent.

A second extension is to broaden the analysis over time to assess trends as new waves of surveys become available. The HRS, for example, allows comparative analysis dating back as early as 1992. As many as three waves of SHARE surveys have been conducted in many countries in Europe. New waves of HRS and SHARE surveys are added every other year. The extension of the analysis to multiple years would allow countries to chart changes in the well-being of their older populations and compare their progress relative to other nations at similar stages of development. Ultimately, comparable measurement of well-being in older populations over time and across countries will enhance our ability to monitor the effects of social, political, and policy changes on these groups. Finally, this work might be extended by assessing how different subgroups of older adults within countries are faring. This analysis requires datasets with large enough sample sizes. For example, the analyses of elderly well-being across U.S. regions and racial/ethnic groups might provide some insight into disparities within the U.S. older population.
By providing a user-friendly measure that summarizes the complex, multi-dimensional nature of well-being and that can be compared across countries, the SCL/PRB Index fills an important gap. The Index serves as a valuable tool for stakeholders to assess the overall status of older population groups across countries and, potentially, over time. It can thus facilitate deliberation on important issues confronting nations as the world population ages. Having an overall measure of well-being, particularly one focused on outcomes, is an important first step in performing analyses that can determine how older populations are faring. The SCL/PRB Index can also help raise public awareness and both motivate and guide policy decisions that will improve the lives of older persons and the societies in which they live.