

Living conditions of the elderly - a European comparison

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It is apparent that in virtually all states of Europe there will be more structural shifts in the age structure of the population in the coming years which will be accompanied by a conflict with the so-called “generation contract” according to which employed younger people provide financially for the retired older ones.

The number of 65 year olds and older rose in the nineties alone by 12% or 1.4 million to 13.5 million. Their share in the total population has risen from 14.9% to 15.7%. At the same time people are living longer, spending a longer period of their lives as pensioners. The proportion of eighty year olds in the German population as a whole has risen eight-fold since the beginning of this century from 0.5% to a current 3.9% and is expected to more than double again by the year 2040.

The situation in some other European countries is even more dramatic. Sweden heads the field with the over sixty-fives accounting for 17.5% of the total population, followed by Italy with 16.8%, Belgium with 16.0% and the United Kingdom with 15.7%. The Netherlands (13.3%), France and Austria (each 15.2%) bring up the rear. This figure is currently considerably lower in the USA at 12.6%.

In the coming years this so-called age ratio will rise in all countries, even steeply in some cases. By the end of the year 2020 every 5th inhabitant in Europe will be 65 or older. Italy will then top the league with 22.7% and Germany with 20.9%, although Sweden (20.8%), Belgium (20.7%) and France (20.5%) will not be far behind (Table 1).

Life expectancy has also substantially increased in all countries over the past 46 years – in some cases by even 10 years and more. This means that the period of time pensioners rely on pensions will increase in all European countries whereby the marked differences which used to exist have now mainly been ironed out. Whilst the male life expectancy in 1950 in the European countries in question ranged between 59.8 (Spain) and 70.5 years of age (Netherlands), i.e. differed by more than 10 years, by 1996 it had narrowed to between 73.3 years of age in Germany and 76.5 in Sweden, representing a span of only some 3 years. The picture is similar for females where the figures are generally some 4 years (1950) and 6 years (1996) higher than those for males. Whilst in the majority of countries the average life expectancy of newborn males in 1950 was below the pensionable age of 65, for example, it is already 10 years above this benchmark today.

Anyone working today should not – at least not exclusively – depend on state pension systems based on the “generation contract” for financial security in old age.

Anyone living in his own four walls saves rent and will usually therefore have substantial additional income which can be used for other (consumer) expenditure. This aspect is of great importance primarily in those countries in which the state pension system plays a subordinate role, i.e. in those countries in which it is of prime importance to take private financial precautions in good time.

Living debt-free in one's own home takes on increasing central importance in view of these circumstances. The question of the current supply of homes to older citizens is therefore most interesting in this context.

According to a study carried out by Eurostat on the living conditions of older people in the European Union (Eurostat 14/1999), the proportion of elderly households (over 65) with owner-occupied homes is 59%. This proportion is therefore not significantly different to the percentage of owner-occupied homes amongst the entire population (60%). Older people more frequently own their own homes than younger persons. This applies to all countries shown in the overview (Table 2) with the exception of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

However, there are significant differences between elderly singles and elderly couples within the elderly household group. In all countries the share of owner-occupied homes amongst elderly couples is almost 20 percentage points larger than amongst elderly singles. The difference is particularly large in France, Belgium and Austria.

If the European Union is viewed as whole, more than two thirds of elderly couples (68%) own their own flat or house. In Spain and Italy this percentage rises to 80% and more whilst it is only a good 50% in Germany and Austria. The majority of elderly couples in the Netherlands live in rented homes.

50 % of elderly singles throughout the EU own their own house or flat. In Germany, the Netherlands and Austria only around one third or fewer of old people live rent-free compared with 70% or more in Spain and Italy.

In addition to home ownership or rented homes, important features of individual living conditions are the size of the home or the number of rooms and standard of comfort. As an average of all EU countries, every citizen has 1.9 rooms. It is not surprising that people living alone have considerably more room to live in than couples. Amongst elderly households the largest number of rooms is to be found in the Netherlands (3.3), United Kingdom (2.9) and Spain (2.8). Many people living alone evidently live in large homes here. Elderly couples have slightly more space (1.9 rooms per person) than the average whilst elderly singles have an average of 3.2 rooms. It is interesting to note that there are no mentionable differences compared with the younger households (without children) here.

In the countries of the European Union only around 5% of households do not have a basic standard of comfort in their homes in the form of bath or shower, inside flushing toilet and hot running water. By contrast, at least one of these features is missing in 9% of elderly households. As a European Union average, the homes of elderly people are substantially less well equipped than younger households. It is difficult to find reasons for the differences between the generations. It can be assumed that elderly people generally live in older flats or houses where basic comfort is more likely to be missing. Hot running water is absent most frequently in the homes of elderly people – as in homes as a whole - followed by a bath or shower.

Table 1

Country	Proportion of 65 year olds and older in the total population in Europe per country in %	
	1996	2020
Sweden	17,5	20,8
Italy	16,8	22,7
Belgium	16,0	20,7
Germany	15,7	20,9
United Kingdom	15,7	19,3
Spain	15,4	19,6
France	15,2	20,5
Austria	15,2	18,9
Netherlands	13,3	19,3

Source: Statistical Office of the European Union; own calculations

Table 2

Country	Home ownership following to living conditions in Europe in per cent					
	All Households	Elderly households			Younger households	
		together	couple	single	couple (without children)	Single
Belgium	69	68	78	56	71	46
Germany	42	41	52	31	44	20
France	56	65	77	52	53	29
United Kingdom	68	59	71	50	81	57
Italy	74	75	80	70	71	62
Netherlands	49	30	40	21	60	24
Austria	49	44	57	35	41	30
Spain	81	80	83	76	75	67
Total EU	60	59	68	50	62	41

Source: Eurostat

Table 3

Country	Number of rooms per person following to living conditions in Europe					
	All households	Elderly households			Younger households	
		together	couple	single	couple (without children)	single
Belgium	2,1	2,7	2,1	3,4	2,1	3,3
Germany	1,9	2,4	1,8	2,8	1,8	2,4
France	1,9	2,6	2,0	3,2	1,9	2,6
United Kingdom	2,2	2,9	2,2	3,4	2,2	3,4

Italy	1,6	2,3	1,6	2,9	1,7	3,1
Netherlands	2,6	3,3	2,5	4,1	2,6	3,7
Austria	1,9	2,7	2,0	3,1	1,8	2,8
Spain	1,7	2,8	2,0	3,9	2,0	3,7
Total EU	1,9	2,6	1,9	3,2	1,9	3,0
Source: Eurostat						

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