

Global Aging

*Comparative Perspectives on Aging
and the Life Course*

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 Need-based eligibility
 Privatized public pension systems
 Pronatalist
 Provident funds
 Public pensions
 Replacement income
 Retrenchment
 Social Security
 State socialism
 Universal programs
 Welfare state

 ESSAY

Older Swedes: Living in the "Role Model of Welfare States"

Kathrin Komp

Populations around the globe are aging, and northern Europe is currently one of the oldest regions in the world (United Nations, 2009). Sweden is the largest country in this region, covering a surface of 450,000 sq km (about 174,000 sq mi), and containing a population of about nine million people (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). It is well known for its extensive forests, harsh winters, and vast population of elk. Among scholars, Sweden is also well known for its welfare state. The Swedish welfare state is famous for the wide range of support it offers its citizens and for its ability to even out social inequalities. Many scholars and policy makers, therefore, look to Sweden for inspiration on how to design social policies. Some scholars even go so far as to refer to Sweden as the "role model of welfare states." Whether it can be maintained that one type of welfare state is better than another is debatable. After all, welfare policies reflect the culture, history, population, and geography of a country. However, Sweden's prominent position in debates about welfare states warrants taking a closer look. This essay (a) describes the state of population aging in Sweden; (b) outlines the key features of the Swedish welfare state; (c) portrays what the Swedish welfare state does for its older citizens; (d) shows how older Swedes participate in their welfare state; and, finally (e) discusses challenges and opportunities for the welfare state in an aging Sweden.

HOW GRAY IS SWEDEN?

The Swedish population has already aged considerably, and this demographic shift is still continuing. In 2012, one in four Swedes was aged 60 and older, and one in five Swedes was aged 65 and older. These numbers put Sweden in the group of the oldest countries in Europe, although not at the absolute top (that distinction belongs to Germany and Italy; Eurostat, 2013). Sweden reached this stage of population aging through slow changes

that took place over more than a century—a characteristic that sets Sweden apart from many other countries that experienced a more recent and dramatic increase in the age of their populations. Chesnais (1992) argues that possible reasons might be that Sweden had a rather stable economy and did not suffer major losses in wars during that time. Expressed in numbers, the proportion of Swedes aged 65 and older doubled from 1960 until today, and it is expected to increase to almost one in three persons by 2050 (Eurostat, 2013; United Nations, 2001). Interestingly, Sweden not only has a large number of older citizens, but its typical citizens reach the impressive age of almost eighty years. Once Swedes reach the age of 65, they can look forward to 14 more years in good health, followed by 5 years in poor health (Eurostat, 2011b). These numbers mean that Swedes can look forward to long lives and to many years of health and activity after retirement.

WHAT IS THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE LIKE?

If countries were compared according to the size of their welfare states, then Sweden would be a giant. In 2012, the Swedish government spent 28% of its budget on social issues, ranking it 5th among both the OECD (the 34 most developed countries in the world) and European countries; and this is 9% higher than the 19% spent by the United States (OECD, 2013). The reason for Sweden's high welfare expenditures is not only the range of welfare provisions there. In addition, the high level of state involvement in welfare provisions boosts welfare budgets. Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) explained that the Swedish government is active in many social areas that in other countries are left to families, companies, or welfare associations. Because of this engagement, the Swedish government manages to drastically reduce social inequalities. Moreover, it creates a densely knit safety net that effectively helps people faced with social risks, such as unemployment or poor health (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi & Palme, 1998). The bottom line is that the Swedish welfare state is very well developed, active, and supportive of its citizens.

WHAT DOES THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE DO FOR ITS OLDER CITIZENS?

The Swedish welfare state supports its older citizens, but it does not favor them over younger ones. Lynch (2001) studied how much welfare states spend on older citizens compared to younger citizens and found that Sweden is much less biased toward its older citizens than, for example, Greece, the United States, or Italy. Instead of explicitly focusing on older citizens, the Swedish welfare state emphasizes programs that support young or middle-aged people, such as childcare services and unemployment benefits, and it is very active in supporting programs that benefit all its citizens equally, such as universal health care that is accessible to anyone in need of help, regardless of their income (Iydegaard & Thorslund, 2010).

Some governmental support programs that are particularly important to older Swedes are pension benefits (similar to Social Security [SS] in the United States), health services, and long-term care services. The Swedish pension scheme sets age 65 as the mandatory retirement age. However, Swedes can transition into early retirement from the age of 55 on, and they do have the legal right to continue working until the age of 67, if they wish (International Social Security Agency, 2010; OECD, 2011b). If older Swedes experience health problems, they can call on the help of public health care services. These services are available to all Swedes, without the need to purchase supplementary health insurance (Paris, Devaux, & Wei, 2010). Finally, if health problems persist, then older Swedes can use publicly funded long-term care services. These services are provided both in the home of the frail person and in institutions (OECD, 2011a).

HOW DO OLDER SWEDES PARTICIPATE IN THEIR WELFARE STATE?

Older Swedes generally are quite active, thanks to their good health. They use their time and capabilities to engage in various activities—several of which affect the welfare state. Older Swedes are politically active, voting in governmental elections more often than their younger counterparts (Komp, 2013), so they have a strong influence on what their government is like. Additionally, older Swedes participate directly as members of parliament, having an immediate impact on what their welfare state does. For example, in 2011 almost one half of the members of the Swedish Parliament were aged 55 or older (Eurostat, 2011a).

On the other hand, older Swedes also engage in activities that are important for welfare states, such as working for pay, volunteering, and helping their kin (Komp & Aarsten, 2013). The workforce participation among older citizens in Sweden is higher than in many other countries. In fact, in 2009 Sweden reached the highest workforce participation rate in Europe for people age 55 to age 64. In that year, 70% of the Swedes in this age group worked for pay (DeStatis [Federal Statistical Office of Germany], 2011). Similarly, Swedes aged 50 and older also are more likely to volunteer in organizations, to provide care to kin, and to help their kin and friends than many other Europeans (Hank & Stuck, 2008). Only in their participation in religious organizations do we find older Swedes to be less active than most of their European peers (Sirven & Debrand, 2008).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE WELFARE STATE IN AGING SWEDEN

Sweden changes as its population ages. The number of older people increases, and Swedes are living longer. This trend challenges the Swedish welfare state to cater more and more to the needs of older people. For this reason, the Swedish government has already begun to change some welfare provisions, such as pension schemes and long-term care services (Hinnrichs, 2000);

Trydegard & Thorslund, 2010). At the same time, a second type of change is occurring within Sweden. Due to the increasing healthy life expectancy, old age is more and more associated with an active lifestyle and social opportunities. This trend is particularly well pronounced in Sweden, because retirees experience a longer period of healthy life than in many other countries. This change opens up new opportunities for the Swedish welfare state. The Swedish government could, for example, try to prolong working lives even more, or they could try to increase social cohesion by encouraging older citizens to volunteer (Komp & Béland, 2012). The aging of the Swedish population is, therefore, more than a simple pressure point for welfare states; it is a qualitative shift that requires policy makers to rethink what it means to be old. Consequently, it is also a shift that allows policy makers to develop a new type of old age policy. The next few decades will show whether the Swedish government is able to seize this opportunity.