

Belgium

- The Belgian population will continue to grow due to natural growth and immigration.
- Most of the larger Belgian surveys are conducted in conjunction with broader international research agendas.
- Data challenges exist in studying Belgian welfare state arrangements and phenomena under communal or regional responsibility (e.g. education, housing).



1. Demographic context

Within Europe, Belgium is a small- to medium-sized country, whose population has been growing modestly and currently stands at the level of 11 million people. According to the most recent projections, the population will reach 12.7 million by 2060, an increase of 16 per cent. Up to 2040 this expansion will be caused by both natural growth and immigration, but from 2050 onwards it will be driven by immigration only.

Belgium has a federal state structure which subdivides the country in two distinct ways. First, the population is divided into three communities that speak different languages: Dutch, French and German. Second, the territory is divided into three regions: Flanders in the north, Wallonia in the south and the Brussels capital region in the centre. As these subdivisions overlap only partly and various federal entities have their own policy domains, the state structure is rather complex. Currently, 6.5 million people live in Flanders (which is exclusively Dutch-speaking) and 3.5 million people live in the Walloon region (which is primarily French-speaking, with a German-speaking minority of 74,000 people). The Brussels capital region has a population of 1.1 million.

In 2012 life expectancy at birth was 84 years for women and 79 years for men, but in 2060 life expectancy is pro-

jected to be 89 years for women and 87 years for men. Thus, a substantial reduction in the existing gender gap is anticipated. As a comparison, in 1950 life expectancy at birth was 66 years for women and 64 years for men. In combination with lower birth rates, these higher life expectancies will lead to increasing dependency ratios: the proportion of people over age 65 to people aged 15-64 will rise from 27 per cent in 2012 to 44 per cent per cent in 2060. It is important to note, however, that these figures are mere averages, and provide no information on the remaining life expectancy in good health. The official retirement age in Belgium is 65. However, the effective retirement age is substantially lower. In 2009 the average retirement age was around 58.3 for women and 59.5 for men. It is therefore no surprise that the level of employment among people age 50 and above was only 51.6 per cent in 2011 (38.7 per cent in the age category 55-64), which is well below the EU27 average of 57.5 per cent. The low levels of employment among older workers may be partly due to the easy availability of schemes facilitating an early labour market exit.

2. Demographic change and policy concerns

Since the late 1980s, and especially after the 1995 federal elections, population ageing has become a public issue in Belgium (Peeters, 2007). As a result, several

small-scale, incremental policy changes have been introduced to address the budgetary consequences of ageing. These policy changes revolve around three broad axes: (1) Increasing the effective age of retirement, (2) lowering public debt and (3) reforming social security.

(1) The effective age of retirement in Belgium is far below the official retirement age of 65. Therefore, the main policy focus has not been on raising the official retirement age, but rather on raising the effective age at which people leave the labour market.

A first set of measures was geared at the two main schemes through which individuals quit working before effective retirement age: i.e. the conventional early leavers scheme and the early retirement scheme. The first important change in the former scheme took place in the wake of the “Generations Pact” of 2005. As a consequence of this pact, the minimum eligibility age for the conventional early leavers scheme was increased from 58 to 60. More recently, following the latest coalition agreement of 2011, the minimum number of career years needed to be eligible for the scheme has been increased, and the name of the scheme has been changed to “unemployment with company supplement”.

(2) Since the 1990s, reducing the high public debt and avoiding budgetary deficits have been central policy goals of the federal government: the resulting lower interest payments could then primarily be used to finance the budgetary costs of ageing. This policy was fairly successful: a budgetary equilibrium was achieved in 2000, public debt reached a low of 84 per cent of GDP in 2007 and interest payments declined to three per cent of GDP. Three important sets of measures can be highlighted: a new state reform was implemented to prevent the kind of inefficient policy-making that results from overlapping competencies between policy levels; fiscal and social fraud are being targeted more actively; and the (real) growth in health-related expenses will be limited to two per cent in 2013 and three per cent in 2014, instead of being permitted to continue at a rate of 4.5 per cent per year, as was the case in the recent past.

(3) In the context of budgetary constraints, several (incremental) changes to social security have also been made. These reforms have been underway since the 1980s, and mainly consist of various technical measures. For instance, as a consequence of the so-called index jumps of 1984, 1985 and 1987; and following the introduction of the “health index” in 1994; the wages on which pensions are calculated are no longer completely inflation-proofed. More recently, following the latest coalition agreement, so-called “assimilated periods” (e.g.

periods of unemployment in which pension rights are accrued) have been made less beneficial in pension calculations.

3. Data sources

General issues

As Belgium is a small country, most of the large-scale surveys that provide information about Belgium are conducted in conjunction with broader international research agendas. The majority of these surveys (such as the Labour Force Survey, the Belgian SILC and the Gender and Generations Survey) are conducted by Statistics Belgium. However, universities also play an important role, either in support of Statistics Belgium or independently.

These international surveys are often the only sources available to researchers and policy-makers focusing on Belgium. Because several policy areas have become “federalised” (i.e. allocated to the regions or communities), many surveys that are not part of international collaborations are limited to a specific region. Supported by Belgian Science Policy, various projects to increase the role played by administrative data in scientific research have been undertaken over the past decade. The most important of these projects is the establishment and gradual expansion of the Data Warehouse Labour Market and Social Protection. In this population-level dataset, the Crossroads Bank for Social Security brings together the various national administrative datasets that are available on the labour market and social protection. Legal issues with regard to the use of statistical data are regulated in the Privacy Act of 8 December 1992 and related legislation. In general terms, this act lays out the rights and obligations of individuals whose data are processed, as well as the rights and obligations of those processing the data.

Privacy legislation distinguishes between anonymised data and non-anonymised data. With regard to the use of non-anonymised data, different procedures exist, depending on the sensitivity of the data in question. More information can be found on the Privacy Commission’s English website: www.privacycommission.be/en.

Health and Performance

The most important dataset for studying health and performance in Belgium is the Health Interview Survey. With this dataset (which is also available in English), health-related issues affecting the elderly in Belgium can be adequately studied. Some information can also be found in the Belgian part of the European Social Survey and

in the Divorce in Flanders survey. Because care-related issues are partly the responsibility of the regions, various ad hoc surveys have also been conducted that relate specifically to Flanders, e.g. the Vlaamse Ouderen Zorg Studie (VoZS) e.g. (organised by Steunpunt Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Gezin; <http://steunpuntwvg.be>).

Social systems and welfare

The Belgian parts of the European SILC and the SHARE projects provide the most accessible data for studying social systems and welfare in Belgium. For the JPI project, the SHARE data offers advantages over the SILC data (SHARE is specifically targeted towards individuals over 50; a retrospective survey was conducted in 2008/2009 (SHARELIFE) which makes it possible for the elderly to be investigated from a life-course perspective; information on the latter is hard to obtain, and the quality of the data is difficult to ascertain).

Work and productivity

For the purposes of exploring work and productivity, following data sources stand out. The Belgian parts of the Labour Force Survey and the European Working Conditions Survey contain easily accessible data. Detailed information can also be found in the Data Warehouse Labour Market and Social Protection. While the data from the Data Warehouse are of high quality, they are difficult to use internationally because they are highly complex, the instructions are not available in English, and the concepts are specific to the Belgian context.

Education and learning

The most important datasets that can be used to study education and learning are those organised at the European level: the Labour Force Survey, the Adult Education Survey, the SHARE, the Gender and Generations Survey and the European Social Survey. To our knowledge, no additional specific Belgian datasets exist. The Belgian Ageing Studies surveys do contain a limited number of questions that may be relevant for studying these issues (e.g. on the question of how often individuals receive training).

Housing, urban development and mobility

To study housing and urban development in Belgium, the best datasets are those from international initiatives, especially the SHARE and the Belgian part of the EU-SILC. More detailed information is available, but only for the Flemish Region, in the Housing Survey. To our knowledge, no similar dataset exists for the other regions. For studying mobility, the best data are those gathered by the BELDAM survey in 2009/ 2010 (<http://www.belspo.be/belspo/fedra/proj.asp?l=en&COD=AG/JJ/150>). The Belgian Ageing Studies surveys contain some information

on housing, urban development and mobility, but the quality of these data is difficult to ascertain. Moreover, the data are only available for Flanders.

Public attitudes towards old age

The most important information for studying public attitudes towards old age can be found in the fourth wave of the European Social Survey. In this wave, additional information was gathered on attitudes towards and experiences of ageism, age-related status, stereotypes, the experience of discrimination and contact with people from other age groups. Unfortunately, as no specific survey exists on public attitudes towards old age in Belgium, information that is specifically relevant in a Belgian context is unavailable.

Social, civic and cultural engagement

The main source of data on social, civic and cultural engagement is the Belgian part of the European Social Survey. The Belgian Ageing Studies surveys also contain a number of questions on these topics. A disadvantage of this latter source is, again, that it only applies to Flanders, and that quality of these data is difficult to ascertain.

Uses of technology

To our knowledge, no specific datasets on the use of technology among people aged 50+ are available for Belgium or for the regions. Only the European Social Survey and the Belgian Ageing Studies surveys, contain questions on the use of the internet and computers.

Wellbeing

As wellbeing is a very broad concept that can be defined in various ways, it can be investigated using various datasets. The Health Interview Survey focuses on wellbeing from a health perspective (making it possible to, for example, calculate remaining life expectancy in good health). Additionally, the Divorce in Flanders survey, the Gender and Generations Survey and the European Social Survey contain multiple questions on different wellbeing dimensions, including physical, emotional, psychological and social wellbeing; as well as questions on work-life balance.

Intergenerational relationships

The Gender and Generations Programme and Divorce in Flanders are the most important data sources on the relationships between generations. Both sources contain multiple questions on the attitudes towards solidarity between the different generations, and the actual support exchanged between the generations in terms of child and elderly care and financial, logistical and emotional support. This information allows for a study

of the frequency and importance of mutually supportive relationships between generations, the factors that facilitate or inhibit such relationships, and the levels of inequality between generations.

4. The data and the policy agenda: gaps and challenges

As Belgium participates in the most important international surveys, such as the Labour Force Survey, the SHARE, the EU-SILC and the European Social Survey, basic information is available that can be used for policy-making in the context of an ageing society. Government policy-makers are greatly helped in their decision-making process by the Study Committee on Ageing [Studiecommissie voor de Vergrijzing / Comité d'étude sur le vieillissement], which was established in 2001 and publishes a yearly report on the budgetary and social consequences of ageing; and the Belgian Health Care Knowledge Centre [Federaal Kenniscentrum voor de Gezondheidszorg / Centre Fédéral d'Expertise des Soins de Santé], which was established in 2002 and produces various studies of high quality designed to advise policy-makers when making decisions on health care and health insurance.

However, important challenges remain that are mostly related to the specificities of the Belgian context.

The first challenge relates to the organisation of the welfare state. As Belgium is a conservative (Bismarckian) welfare state, the occupational category to which a person belongs is of key importance. Quite often, different categories of workers (e.g. employees, self-employed and civil servants) receive different welfare benefits, making the study of welfare state arrangements far from straightforward.

An additional challenge has to do with the continuing devolution of responsibilities to the regions and communities. Policy domains as diverse as education, housing, care, cultural engagement and mobility are no longer the (main) responsibility of the federal government. This is especially problematic for researchers seeking to study

these specific policy domains (e.g. housing). Consequently, these researchers will often have to limit their research to one specific region or community.

In addition to devoting more research and policy attention to the importance of wealth, a number of steps could be taken to address the above-mentioned challenges. There is a clear need for a single agency that supervises data gathering at all levels. Currently, data collection is dispersed among a number of agencies, such as Statistics Belgium, the Crossroads Bank for Social Security, universities, and federal and regional agencies. This fragmentation also makes it very difficult for researchers studying ageing societies to find the information they require.

This policy brief summarises the major data sources for the ten policy fields identified by the working group of the Data Mapping Project of the Joint Programming Initiative “More Years, Better Lives”. An extended version of the original text and more information on the described sources are available at <http://www.jpi-dataproject.eu/>.

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