Bittár, N. H., Nilsson, A. H., Dahlen, M., Nathanson, M., Kajonius, P. J., Kjell, O., Lomas, T., Padgett, R. N., Case, B., Chen, Y., Cowden, R. G., Johnson, B. R., VanderWeele, T. J. (2026). Flourishing in Sweden: Great overall—but not for all. *International Journal of Wellbeing, 15*(3), 6001, 1-28.
https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v15i3.6001

INVITED ARTICLE

Flourishing in Sweden: Great overall—but not for all

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Abstract: Sweden consistently ranks among the world's happiest nations in global surveys. However, such rankings—typically focused on one single life evaluation indicator—may obscure important differences across life domains and population subgroups. Using nationally representative data from 15,068 Swedish adults in the Global Flourishing Study (GFS), this article offers a multidimensional assessment of human flourishing in Sweden across seven domains: psychological wellbeing, purpose and meaning, character and virtue, psychological distress, physical health, social wellbeing, and financial wellbeing. Swedish respondents, on average, reported high levels of life evaluation and financial wellbeing, and low psychological distress, positioning Sweden favorably among the 22 GFS countries. However, comparatively lower scores were observed in purpose and meaning and character and virtue. When comparing population subgroups, a pronounced age gradient emerged, with older Swedes reporting higher wellbeing across nearly all domains compared to younger adults, and many indicators showing medium to large effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's *d*s = 0.77 and 0.70 for loneliness and happiness, respectively). Gender and immigration-related differences indicated somewhat lower levels of flourishing among women and foreign-born individuals. The effect sizes were, however, relatively small (e.g., *d*s at 0.21 in traumatic distress and 0.22 in anxiety for gender and immigration, respectively). These findings highlight Sweden's strengths in supporting wellbeing and flourishing later in life while also pointing to disparities, particularly among younger adults, but also women and foreign-born populations. The results underscore the value of a multidimensional flourishing framework that moves beyond life evaluations and national averages to identify wellbeing inequalities between sociodemographic groups, even in a country routinely ranked among the world's happiest.

Keywords: Global Flourishing Study; flourishing; wellbeing; health; sociodemographic distribution, Sweden

1. Introduction

Sweden, alongside other Nordic countries, consistently ranks among the top in global happiness rankings, such as the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2024; Helliwell et al., 2025). While often interpreted as evidence of national success in providing conditions for happiness, these rankings rely on a single life evaluation measure, where respondents rate their current lives from worst to best possible using a metaphorical ladder to represent their lives. Scholars have long contended that no single metric can fully capture how well lives are going (VanderWeele, 2017). Critics also suggest that the particular ladder framing may unintentionally emphasize power and

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wealth over broader concepts of wellbeing and relationships (Nilsson et al., 2024). Relying solely on a single indicator of wellbeing can thus lead to an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of the population's wellbeing (VanderWeele & Johnson, 2025a).

In contrast, the concept of flourishing has emerged as a more comprehensive and multidimensional framework (VanderWeele & Johnson, 2025b). On one definition, flourishing is "the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the contexts in which that person lives" (Lomas et al., 2024a). Flourishing includes (but is not necessarily limited to) domains such as psychological wellbeing, mental and physical health, purpose and meaning, and close social relationships, with financial and material security treated as a potentially important means for sustaining flourishing in other domains (VanderWeele, 2017).

Although the flourishing framework provides a more comprehensive view of wellbeing, it is essential to consider the heterogeneity of its distribution across populations. National averages may support international comparisons and country rankings, but they can mask meaningful disparities within countries. In Sweden and other parts of the Western world, for example, recent findings point to a widening intergenerational gap where older adults report increasing wellbeing while younger individuals experience notable declines (Bialowolski et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2022; Helliwell et al., 2024; Nilsson et al., 2025). Such findings call for closer attention to within-country disparities in the distribution of flourishing.

1.1 The Swedish context

Sweden is a Nordic country located on the Scandinavian Peninsula in Northern Europe, historically inhabited by the Norse (Vikings). The country is the fifth largest in Europe by area, yet one of the most sparsely populated, with about 10.6 million inhabitants as of 2024 (Statistics Sweden, 2024). Urbanization is high, with nearly 87% of the population living in urban areas, with the capital city, Stockholm, forming the largest metropolitan region. Sweden has a long history of governmental stability and is often noted for ranking high on indices related to human development, such as press freedom, gender equality, and innovation (United Nations Development Programme, 2025). Sweden remained neutral in both World War I and World War II, upholding its tradition of non-alignment. Although it is a member of the European Union, Sweden continues to use its own currency, the Swedish krona. However, recent geopolitical developments have led to NATO membership, finalized in 2024 (Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2024). For more information about the national context, see Pierre (2016).

1.1.1 Flourishing in Sweden

In terms of wellbeing, Sweden has consistently been recognized as one of the top 10 happiest countries in the world over the past decade, placing 4th in both 2024 and 2025 according to the World Happiness Report (e.g., Helliwell et al., 2024; Helliwell et al., 2025). All Nordic countries are ranked near the top, but Sweden is the only Nordic country included in the Global Flourishing Study (GFS).

Although the World Happiness rankings have extensive global coverage, the use of a single metric raises questions about whether Swedes are actually flourishing. While life evaluation scores in Sweden have been consistently high, the picture may be more mixed when other aspects of flourishing are considered. Still, according to OECD's Better Life Index, Sweden performs above international averages across a wide range of wellbeing indicators, including health, income, education, environmental quality, and social connections (OECD, 2025). For instance, a

greater proportion of Swedes report being in good health, and fewer work excessively long hours, compared to OECD averages (OECD, 2025).

The following sections highlight key national characteristics that help contextualize flourishing in the Swedish setting.

1.1.2 The Swedish welfare state

Sweden is internationally recognized for its comprehensive welfare state, which provides universal benefits in areas such as healthcare, education, elder care, childcare, and parental leave. For example, beyond some relatively small patient fees, healthcare is free in Sweden (1177 healthcare guide, 2023), and all basic education and state-owned universities are free (Eurydice, 2023). Sweden is one of the few countries in the world that serves free school lunches in primary and secondary school. The average household income exceeds the OECD average (OECD, 2025), and the country has traditionally been associated with high levels of income equality. This national context may contribute to higher levels of flourishing among Swedish respondents in the GFS data, as prior research has found a link between lower income inequality and greater wellbeing both within (e.g. Oishi et al., 2011) and between countries (e.g., Alesina et al., 2004). Comprehensive welfare systems may also play a protective role against social risks, such as loneliness, possibly by reducing reliance on individual or family resources for social wellbeing (Nyqvist et al., 2019; Oh & Choi, 2024).

However, income inequality in Sweden has been on the rise in recent years. Sweden's Gini coefficient recently reached its highest level (0.33 on the *0 = complete equality* to *1 = complete inequality* scale) since measurements began in 1975 (Statistics Sweden, 2023), and the country dropped to the lowest among Nordic countries on a global index measuring commitment to reducing inequality (Oxfam Sweden, 2022). These shifts suggest that disparities in financial wellbeing among demographic subgroups may be reflected in the GFS data.

1.1.3 Secularism and individualism

Swedish society is often characterized by high levels of secularism and individualism. On the World Values Survey's cultural map, Sweden ranks at the extreme end in valuing individual autonomy and self-expression over religion or traditional authority (World Values Survey, 2023). Previous studies suggest that wealthier and more secular societies tend to report lower levels of purpose and meaning compared to poorer, more religious countries (Oishi & Diener, 2014), suggesting that Sweden might generally have lower scores on this domain of flourishing compared to less developed and less secular parts of the world. However, Sweden's strong secularism and individualism are tempered by high interpersonal trust and social support. Previous studies have shown that over 6 in 10 Swedes agree that "most people can be trusted", one of the highest rates globally (World Values Survey, 2022). Furthermore, the vast majority (94%) of Swedes believe that they know someone they can rely on in times of need, above the OECD average of 91% (OECD, 2025). Sweden also ranks among the highest in the world in expectations that a lost wallet will be returned by a neighbor (Helliwell et al., 2025). Such high interpersonal trust and social support might bolster social wellbeing in the GFS data.

1.1.4 Gender equality

Sweden is renowned for its strong commitment to gender equality. It consistently ranks among the top countries in global gender equality assessments (e.g., European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024; Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2023; World Economic

Forum, 2023) and is known for progressive policies such as anti-discrimination laws and subsidized childcare. Parents have 480 days for parental leave per child (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2024). Despite these achievements, gender disparities persist in certain aspects of health and wellbeing. National statistics from 2024 show that women tend to report higher rates of anxiety than men (Public Health Agency of Sweden, n.d.) and take nearly twice as many sick days (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2025). Moreover, findings from a previous study with a Swedish Stockholm-based sample identified being male as a statistically significant, though weak, predictor of higher wellbeing (standardized $\beta = 0.09$; Hansson et al., 2005). These patterns align with broader international findings indicating that women worldwide experience higher rates of internalizing disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression) than men, who tend to struggle more with externalizing disorders (e.g., substance abuse) (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2024; Farhane-Medina et al., 2022).

1.1.5 Demographic trends

Like many high-income countries, Sweden is undergoing significant demographic change. The country has one of the highest life expectancies worldwide (Statista, 2024), and the proportion of Swedes aged 65 and older has grown from 14% in 1970 to 20% in 2023 (Statista, n.d.). At the same time, birth rates are declining, with the national fertility rate reaching a historic low of 1.43 children per woman in 2024 (Statistics Sweden, 2025). These shifts, combined with emerging evidence of a wellbeing gap favoring older adults (Nilsson et al., 2025), raise important questions about how different age groups in Sweden are experiencing their lives across various flourishing domains.

In addition, Sweden has become increasingly diverse. As of 2023, approximately 20% of the population was born abroad, with Syria, Iraq, and Finland among the most common countries of origin (OECD, 2024). Some studies indicate that immigrants and native-born populations report similar wellbeing when using life evaluation measures (Helliwell et al., 2018), but other research shows that immigrants in Sweden face a higher risk of psychological distress (Johnson et al., 2017). Based on this, we anticipate lower levels of wellbeing among foreign-born respondents in at least some flourishing domains.

1.2 This study

This study provides the first nationally representative, multidomain assessment of human flourishing in Sweden using GFS data. By moving beyond single life evaluation metrics, the GFS framework offers a rich and nuanced picture of wellbeing, enabling international comparisons as well as comparisons across demographic groups.

The study has two primary aims:

1. **To examine flourishing in Sweden in** relation to the other GFS countries.
2. **To investigate the distribution of flourishing across key demographic groups** in Sweden, including age, gender, and immigration status.

We focus on seven flourishing domains aligned with VanderWeele's (2017) framework: (1) Psychological Wellbeing, (2) Purpose and Meaning, (3) Character and Virtue, (4) Psychological Distress, (5) Physical Health, (6) Social Wellbeing, and (7) Financial Wellbeing.

By applying a multidimensional framework to wellbeing in one of the world's "happiest" countries (Helliwell et al., 2025), this study seeks to shed light on both areas of strength and sources of concern. It reveals which aspects of life are going well in Sweden and for whom, while also highlighting areas where more targeted policy attention may be needed.

2. Methods

The methodological approach described below has been adapted from VanderWeele et al. (2025). Further details are available in other sources, including an overview of the GFS as a whole (Johnson et al., 2024) and its general methodology (Ritter et al., 2024); the initial questionnaire development report (Crabtree et al., 2021; 2024) and an updated account of the questionnaire development process (Lomas et al., 2025a), which included cognitive interviewing of items (Cowden et al., 2025); the Wave 1 codebook (Markham et al., 2024); the survey sampling design for Wave 1 (Padgett et al., 2025b); the initial statistical analysis code (Padgett et al., 2024); and the analytic methodology for demographic variation analyses in Wave 1 (Padgett et al., 2025a). Gallup translated the GFS survey into multiple languages (Case et al., 2025) following the TRAPD (translation, review, adjudication, pretesting, and documentation) model for cross-cultural survey research (Lomas et al., 2025a). The current paper, focusing specifically on Sweden, was pre-registered as part of a coordinated set of country-specific analyses. These analyses were pre-registered on October 15, 2024 (Lomas et al., 2024b; https://doi.org/10.17605/osf.io/trcf3). The data are publicly available through the Center for Open Science (https://www.cos.io/gfs-access-data).

2.1 Data

The GFS Wave 1 (2023) includes 202,898 participants from 22 countries, with nationally representative sampling within each country. Data collection was carried out by Gallup. Precise sampling designs varied by country, and further details are available in Ritter et al. (2024). In Sweden, 15,068 participants were recruited, and data were collected in January (26% of respondents), February (43%), and March (30%) of 2023 (Ritter et al., 2024). Gallup recruited Swedish respondents via non-probabilistic, pre-existing digital opt-in panels. Pseudo-sampling weights based on propensity score methods were then calculated for Sweden using official statistics for age × gender, education, and region. This approach estimated each respondent's probability of inclusion in the panel and generated respondent-level survey weights for analysis.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Flourishing variables

To improve readability and focus of this paper, we present a subset of 21 out of the 58 collected indicators of flourishing, distributed across seven flourishing domains. The selection of outcome variables was primarily guided by VanderWeele's (2017) Flourishing Index, which offers a brief yet multidimensional set of items for assessing human flourishing. However, some adjustments were made. For example, we included indicators of "balance in life" and "at peace" in the *Happiness and Life Satisfaction* domain, based on emerging research suggesting their relevance to flourishing (Delle Fave et al., 2023; Kjell, 2011; Lomas, 2021; Lomas et al., 2022; Lomas et al., 2025c; Lomas et al., 2025d). To reflect this adjustment, we relabelled the domain as *Psychological Wellbeing*. We also separated VanderWeele's (2017) original *Mental and Physical Health* domain into two distinct domains, *Psychological Distress* and *Physical Health*, to better reflect the different dynamics and policy implications of the physical versus mental qualities of human experience. Descriptive statistics (means/proportions and 95% CIs) for all collected indicators, across all demographic groups, are presented in the Supplementary Materials.

Table 1 presents information on the domain indicators, item wordings, and response formats for the subset of variables analyzed in this paper.

Table 1. *Overview of indicators and corresponding measures*

Indicator	Item Wording	Response Scale	OSF Link
Psychological Wellbeing			
Happiness	"In general, how happy or unhappy do you usually feel?"	*0 = Extremely unhappy to 10 = Extremely happy*	https://osf.io/46vr3
At peace	"In general, how often do you feel you are at peace with your thoughts and feelings?"	*1 = Always, 2 = Often, 3 = Rarely, 4 = Never; Recoded as 0 = Rarely/Never, 1 = Always/Often*	https://osf.io/yf6s3
Balance in Life	"In general, how often are the various aspects of your life in balance?"	*1 = Always, 2 = Often, 3 = Rarely, 4 = Never; Recoded as 0 = Rarely/Never, 1 = Always/Often*	https://osf.io/zt84x
Present Life Evaluation	"On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?"	*0 = Worst possible life to 10 = Best possible life*	https://osf.io/b8z59
Future Life Evaluation	"Just your best guess, on which step do you think you will stand in the future, say about five years from now?"	*0 = Worst possible life to 10 = Best possible life*	https://osf.io/b8z59
Purpose and Meaning			
Purpose	"I understand my purpose in life."	*0 = Strongly disagree to 10 = Strongly agree*	https://osf.io/u3pfz
Meaning	"Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?"	*0 = Not at all worthwhile to 10 = Completely worthwhile*	https://osf.io/u3pfz
Character and Virtue			
Promoting Good	"I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations."	*0 = Not true of you at all to 10 = Completely true of you*	https://osf.io/cyqxh
Delayed Gratification	"I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later."	*0 = Not true of you at all to 10 = Completely true of you*	https://osf.io/927bn
Psychological Distress			
Traumatic Distress	"Think about the biggest threat to life you've ever witnessed or experienced first-hand during your life. In the past month, how much	*1 = A lot, 2 = Some, 3 = Not very much, 4 = None at all; Recoded as 0 = Not very*	https://osf.io/s7naf

Indicator	Item Wording	Response Scale	OSF Link
	have you been bothered by this experience?"	*much/None at all, 1 = A lot/Some*	
Depression	"Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems? Feeling down, depressed or hopeless?" and "Little interest or pleasure in doing things?"	*1 = Nearly every day, 2 = More than half the days, 3 = Several days, 4 = Not at all; Recoded as 0 = Not at all/Several days, 1 = Nearly every day/More than half the days.*[1]	https://osf.io/rjyqm
Anxiety	"Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems? Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge?" and "Not being able to stop or control worrying?"	*1 = Nearly every day, 2 = More than half the days, 3 = Several days, 4 = Not at all; Recoded as 0 = Not at all/Several days, 1 = Nearly every day/More than half the days.*[2]	https://osf.io/rjyqm
Suffering	"To what extent are you suffering? This can be any type of physical or mental suffering."	*1 = A lot, 2 = Some, 3 = Not very much, 4 = Not at all; Recoded as 0 = Not very much/None at all, 1 = A lot/Some*	https://osf.io/8rxpg
Physical Health			
Self-Rated Physical Health	"In general, how would you rate your physical health?"	*0 = Poor physical health to 10 = Excellent physical health*	https://osf.io/2z356
Health Limitations	"Do you have any health problems that prevent you from doing any of the things people your age normally can do?"	*1 = Yes, 2 = No; Recoded as 0 = No, 1 = Yes*	https://osf.io/uk9ay
Pain	"How much bodily pain have you had during the past 4 weeks?"	*1 = A lot, 2 = Some, 3 = Not very much, 4 = None at all; Recoded as 0 = Not very much/None at all, 1 = A lot/Some*	https://osf.io/ewyr5
Social Wellbeing			
Social Relationship Quality	"I am content with my friendships and relationships." and "My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be."	*0 = Strongly disagree to 10 = Strongly agree*	https://osf.io/wvzns

[1] The sum of the two items is treated as approximately continuous after reverse coding: response options coded as: 0 = Not at all, 1 = Several days, 2 = More than half the days, 3 = Nearly every day.

[2] *See footnote 1.*

Indicator	Item Wording	Response Scale	OSF Link
Social Support	"If you were in trouble, how often could you count on people in your life, like relatives or friends, to help you whenever you need them?"	*0 = Never to 10 = Always*	https://osf.io/93rqp
Loneliness	"How often do you feel lonely?"	*0 = Always to 10 = Never; Recoded as 0 = Never to 10 = Always*	https://osf.io/4rcnu
Financial Wellbeing			
Financial Stability	"How often do you worry about being able to meet normal monthly living expenses?"	*0 = Worry all of the time to 10 = Do not ever worry*	https://osf.io/g64qs
Material Stability	"How often do you worry about safety, food, or housing?"	*0 = Worry all of the time to 10 = Do not ever worry*	https://osf.io/g64qs

2.2.2 Variables for demographic variation analysis

Among the eight demographic variables collected—age, gender, marital status, employment status, education, religious affiliation, race/ethnicity, and immigration status—we focus our analyses on age, gender, and immigration status. These groups were selected because they represent relatively foundational and stable characteristics and carry particular relevance in the Swedish context. *Age* was emphasized in the light of emerging evidence of an age-related wellbeing gap in Sweden (Helliwell et al., 2024; Nilsson et al., 2025). *Gender* was included given Sweden's recognition as one of the most gender-equal societies globally (e.g., European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024; Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023), offering a lens to examine whether wellbeing disparities still persist and in which domains. *Immigration status* was analyzed in view of Sweden's recent large-scale immigration (OECD, 2024) and the associated implications for integration and wellbeing. Full analyses of all eight demographic variables are provided in the Supplementary Materials.

Age (measured in years) was grouped into categories: 18–24, 25–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70–79, and 80+. The outcomes for all age groups are presented in Figures 1–7. However, only the values for the youngest (18–24) and oldest (80+) groups are reported in Table 4, both to aid readability and because they serve as the reference points for calculating Cohen's *d*. Gender was self-identified as male or female. Immigration status was assessed with the question: "Were you born in this country, or not?" (yes/no). For additional details on the survey measures, see the GFS codebook: Markham et al., (2024) or Crabtree et al. (2024).

2.3 Analyses

2.3.1 Statistical models

Our analyses were aligned with demographic variation analyses focusing on a single construct indicator across GFS countries (see pre-registrations links above). The statistical approach in this study consisted of: (1) describing weighted sample characteristics for Sweden; (2) estimating the overall mean or proportion for each outcome in Sweden and pooled across all 22 GFS countries; and (3) comparing subgroup means or proportions across demographic categories in Sweden. All reported outcome means and proportions are accompanied by 95% confidence intervals.

2.3.2 Effect sizes

Effect sizes were calculated to provide a standardized measure of group differences, enabling meaningful comparisons across diverse flourishing domains. We first compared Sweden to the pooled GFS average. Standardized differences were obtained by dividing mean differences by the heterogeneity value across all 22 countries. We then examined sociodemographic group differences within Sweden. For continuous outcomes, Cohen's *d* was computed using the estimated standard deviation of the full Swedish sample as an approximation of the pooled standard deviation; for binary outcomes, standard deviations were approximated using $\sqrt{p(1-p)}$. While this approach provides a common standardized metric, Cohen's *d* is less intuitive for binary outcomes and should be interpreted with some caution in those cases. Effect sizes were interpreted according to empirical guidelines in social psychology: small (0.15), medium (0.36), and large (0.65) (Lovakov & Agadullina, 2021).

2.3.3 Inference criteria

Differences in means and proportions across groups are evaluated using 95% confidence intervals.

2.3.4 Missing data and multiple imputation

All missing values were handled using multiple imputation by chained equations. Five imputed datasets were generated (following Sterne et al., 2009; van Buuren, 2023). The imputation model included each outcome variable, all demographic characteristics, and sampling weights. Sampling weights were included in the imputation models to account for specific-variable missingness that may have been related to probability of inclusion in the study. Because some background variables were assessed differently across countries, imputation was conducted separately for each country. This within-country imputation ensured that the model reflected country-specific contexts and measurement differences.

2.3.5 Accounting for complex sampling design

The GFS employed different sampling schemes across countries based on available panels and recruitment needs (Ritter et al., 2024). All analyses accounted for the complex survey design by incorporating the survey weights and specifying primary sampling units and strata as appropriate. Additional methodological details on accounting for the complex design are provided elsewhere (Padgett et al., 2025b).

3. Results

This section presents findings from the Swedish sample of the GFS. It begins with the demographic characteristics of the Swedish participants, then compares flourishing outcomes to the pooled GFS cross-country average, and finally examines within-country variation across key demographic groups (age, gender, and immigration status).

3.1 Description of Swedish sample

Demographic characteristics of the Swedish sample are presented in Table 2, including age, gender, and immigration background. The age groups were quite evenly distributed (around 15% for each 10-year age group), except for a smaller proportion of individuals in the 80+ group (4.1%). Gender was evenly distributed across males and females. Approximately 7% of respondents were born abroad, a lower proportion than the approximately 20% of foreign-born

individuals estimated in the Swedish population (OECD, 2024). Please see the Supplementary Materials for additional demographic details.

Table 2. *Nationally representative descriptive statistics for sociodemographic characteristics in the Swedish sample*

Characteristic	***N* = 15,068**
Age group	
18-24	1,515 (10%)
25-29	1,399 (9.3%)
30-39	2,398 (16%)
40-49	2,221 (15%)
50-59	2,493 (17%)
60-69	2,168 (14%)
70-79	2,253 (15%)
80 or older	621 (4.1%)
(Missing)	0 (0%)
Gender	
Male	7,536 (50%)
Female	7,493 (50%)
Other	27 (0.2%)
(Missing)	12 (<0.1%)
Immigration	
Born in this country	13,922 (92%)
Born in another country	1,052 (7.0%)
(Missing)	94 (0.6%)

3.2 Flourishing in Sweden compared to GFS countries

Table 3 presents a comparative overview of wellbeing outcomes for Swedish respondents versus the pooled estimates in the total GFS sample.

Compared to the pooled GFS average, Swedish respondents reported distinct strengths across several flourishing domains. For example, present life evaluation was 7.20 in Sweden versus 6.34 across the pooled sample. Indicators of psychological distress were consistently lower among Swedes, with reduced levels of traumatic distress, depression, anxiety, and suffering. Notably, anxiety was nearly twice as high in the pooled GFS sample (0.30) as in the Swedish sample (0.16). In the financial domain, both financial stability (Swedish vs. pooled GFS, 7.23 vs. 5.59) and material stability (7.50 vs. 5.89) were more than a point higher in Sweden. Taken together, these findings indicate comparatively favorable standing for Sweden in the flourishing domains of psychological wellbeing, psychological distress, and financial wellbeing.

At the same time, the Swedish respondents reported notably lower levels of purpose and meaning, with the average purpose score a full point lower than the pooled estimate (6.65 vs. 7.65), and meaning also somewhat lower (7.06 vs. 7.39). Self-rated physical health was likewise

lower in Sweden (6.41 vs. 7.21), with somewhat higher health limitations (0.26 vs. 0.21). In the character and virtue domain, Swedish respondents scored below the GFS pooled average on both promoting good (7.56 vs. 8.01) and delayed gratification (6.99 vs. 7.45). Social wellbeing indicators were mixed: while Swedes reported more social support and less loneliness, they also rated their social relationship quality slightly lower than the pooled GFS average. Moreover, although the reported life evaluation scores were comparatively high in the Swedish sample, the reported levels of happiness and future life evaluation were closer to the pooled GFS estimates, underscoring that Sweden's strengths in flourishing appear more pronounced in certain aspects of wellbeing but less evident in others.

Table 3. *Flourishing indicators in Sweden vs. the pooled cross-country average*

Indicator	Means/Proportions (95% CI) for Sweden	Means/Proportions (95% CI) for all GFS countries	Standardized difference
Psychological Wellbeing			
Happiness	7.03 (6.99, 7.07)	7.00 (6.76, 7.25)	0.05
At peace	**0.82 (0.81, 0.83)***	0.71 (0.67, 0.76)*	1.00
Balance in Life	**0.80 (0.79, 0.80)***	0.69 (0.64, 0.74)*	0.92
Present Life Evaluation	**7.20 (7.16, 7.23)***	6.34 (6.01, 6.67)*	1.09
Future Life Evaluation	7.70 (7.67, 7.74)	7.49 (7.21, 7.77)	0.31
Purpose and Meaning			
Purpose	6.65 (6.60, 6.70)*	**7.65 (7.32, 7.98)***	-1.27
Meaning	7.06 (7.02, 7.10)*	**7.39 (7.12, 7.66)***	-0.51
Character and Virtue			
Promoting Good	7.56 (7.52, 7.59)*	**8.01 (7.77, 8.25)***	-0.79
Delayed Gratification	6.99 (6.95, 7.03)*	**7.45 (7.14, 7.75)***	-0.62
Psychological Distress			
Traumatic Distress	0.25 (0.24, 0.26)*	**0.36 (0.32, 0.41)***	-1.10
Depression	0.18 (0.17, 0.19)*	**0.32 (0.27, 0.37)***	-0.30
Anxiety	0.16 (0.15, 0.16)*	**0.30 (0.25, 0.34)***	-0.29
Suffering	0.34 (0.33, 0.35)*	**0.44 (0.40, 0.49)***	-0.91
Physical Health			
Self-Rated Physical Health	6.41 (6.37, 6.45)*	**7.21 (6.93, 7.49)***	-1.19
Health Limitations	**0.26 (0.25, 0.27)***	0.21 (0.18, 0.24)*	0.83
Pain	0.40 (0.39, 0.41)	0.44 (0.40, 0.48)	-0.40
Social Wellbeing			
Social Relationship Quality	7.23 (7.18, 7.27)*	**7.55 (7.30, 7.79)***	-0.55
Social Support	**8.16 (8.12, 8.20)***	7.40 (7.02, 7.78)*	0.84
Loneliness	3.03 (2.98, 3.08)*	**3.38 (3.16, 3.60)***	-0.67
Financial Wellbeing			
Financial Stability	**7.23 (7.18, 7.28)***	5.59 (5.16, 6.02)*	1.59
Material Stability	**7.50 (7.45, 7.55)***	5.89 (5.41, 6.38)*	1.39

Note. Table 3 shows means for continuous measures and proportions for categorical measures with 95% confidence intervals (CI) for each indicator in Sweden and all GFS countries. The mean/proportion for all

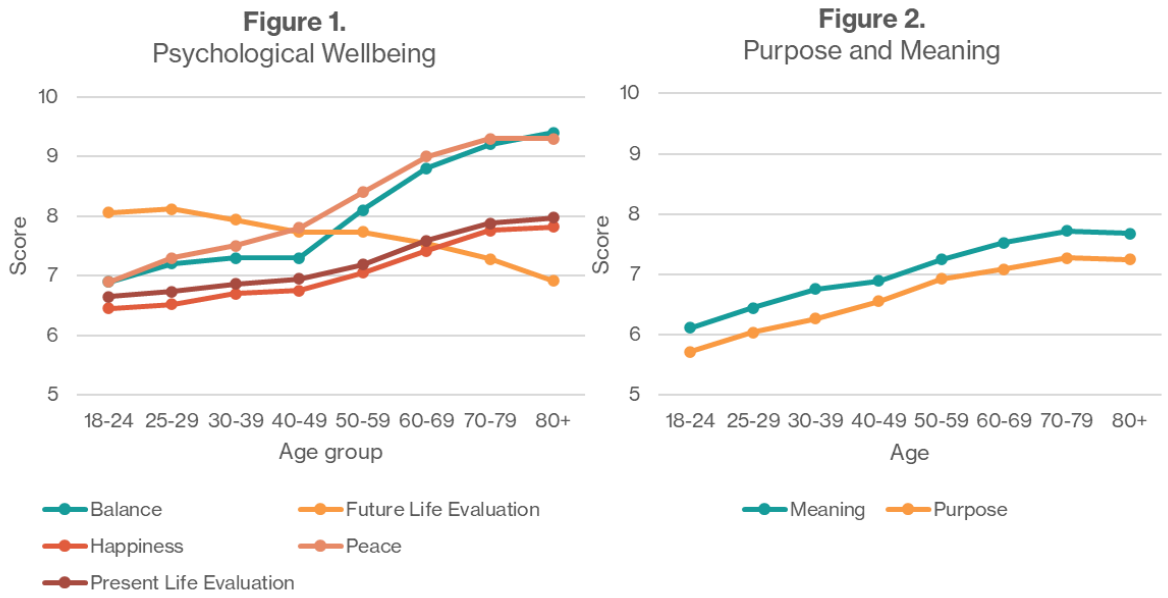
GFS countries is derived via meta-analysis of country-specific estimates. Non-overlapping CIs are marked with an asterisk (*), with the higher values highlighted in **bold**.

3.3 Age differences in flourishing

Figures 1-7 illustrate the age-related differences in outcomes across all age groups and Table 4 compares flourishing outcomes across the youngest (18–24) and oldest (80+) Swedes. Older adults generally reported higher wellbeing across most domains than younger individuals. For instance, mean life evaluation was 7.97 in the oldest age group compared to 6.65 in the youngest group, and happiness was 7.82 versus 6.45. The oldest adults also reported higher levels of purpose (older vs. younger: 7.25 vs. 5.72), meaning (7.68 vs. 6.12), and financial stability (8.78 vs. 6.65) compared to the youngest Swedes. Moreover, the oldest Swedes reported higher social wellbeing in all indicators, including higher social relationship quality (8.21 vs. 6.75), higher social support (8.51 vs. 8.03), and lower loneliness (2.08 vs. 4.12). In the character and virtue domain, older Swedes reported higher levels of promoting good (7.82 vs. 7.06), whereas younger adults reported slightly higher delayed gratification (7.13 vs. 6.49). However, the oldest adults also reported more health-related limitations (0.34 vs. 0.18) and pain (0.44 vs. 0.33) compared to the youngest group.

In contrast, younger adults reported considerably higher levels of psychological distress. Depression averaged 0.37 in the youngest age group (18–24) compared to 0.11 in the oldest age group (80+), and anxiety was 0.35 versus 0.05. This means that younger adults reported depression symptoms about three times and anxiety symptoms about seven times as often as older adults. Suffering was also somewhat higher among the youngest group (youngest vs. oldest: 0.42 vs. 0.33). Although younger Swedes consistently reported lower levels of wellbeing across most flourishing domains, they still reported the most optimistic future life evaluations (8.06 vs. 6.91). Most effect sizes for the age-related differences between the youngest and oldest groups ranged from medium to large (see Cohen's *d*s in Table 4).

Figures 1-7. *Flourishing in Sweden across age groups*



Note. In Figure 1, Balance and At peace have been rescaled from 0–1 to 0–10 to align with the other indicators in the figure. In Figures 1, 2, and 3, the y-axis begins at score 5 to enhance visual clarity.

Figures 1-7. *Flourishing in Sweden across age groups (Cont.)*

Figure 3.
Character and Virtue

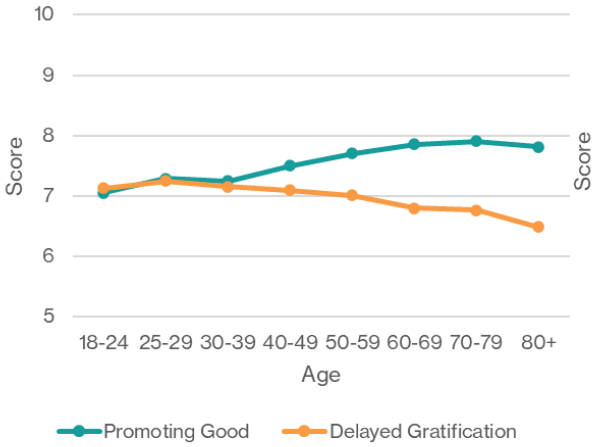


Figure 4.
Psychological Distress

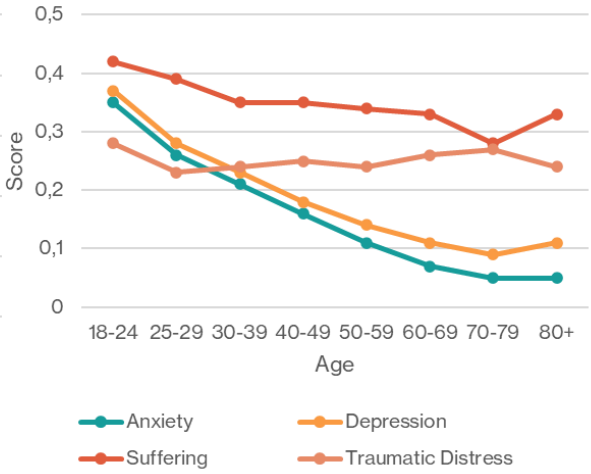


Figure 5.
Physical Health

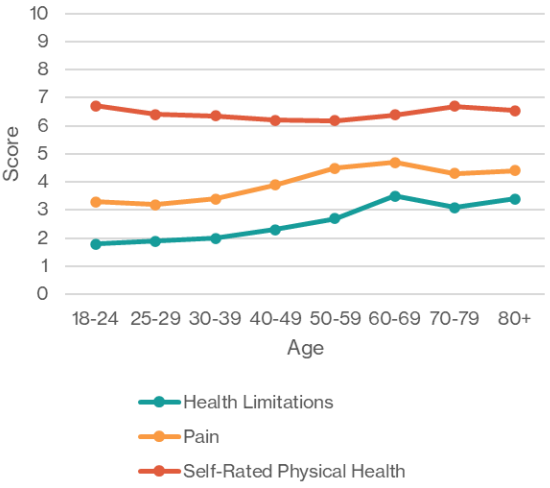


Figure 6.
Social Wellbeing

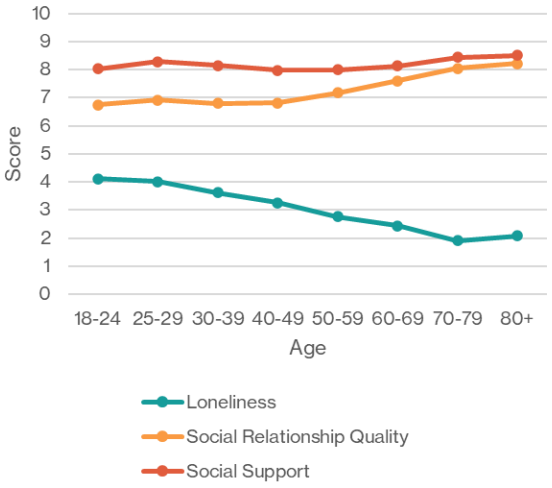
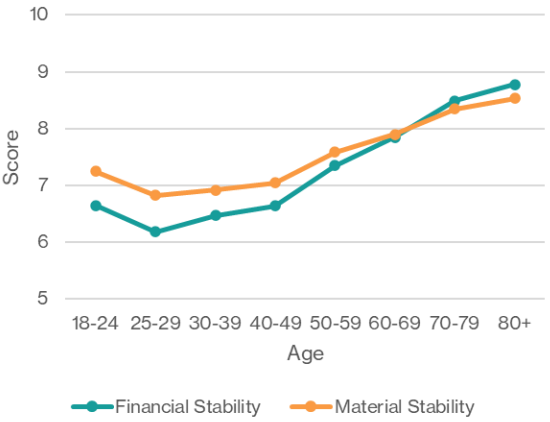


Figure 7.
Financial Wellbeing



Note. In Figures 1, 2, and 3, the y-axis begins at score 5 to enhance visual clarity. In Figure 7, the y-axis begins at score 5 to enhance visual clarity.

Table 4. *Flourishing in Sweden in the youngest (18-24 years) and oldest (80+ years) age groups*

Indicator	Means/Proportions (95% CI) for 18-24 years	Means/Proportions (95% CI) for 80+ years	Cohen's *d*
Psychological Wellbeing			
Happiness	6.45 (6.33, 6.57)*	**7.82 (7.67, 7.98)***	-0.70
Present Life Evaluation	6.65 (6.54, 6.75)*	**7.97 (7.81, 8.12)***	-0.75
Future Life Evaluation	**8.06 (7.97, 8.14)***	6.91 (6.68, 7.13)*	0.65
At peace	0.69 (0.66, 0.72)*	**0.93 (0.91, 0.95)***	-0.58
Balance in Life	0.69 (0.67, 0.72)*	**0.94 (0.91, 0.96)***	-0.61
Purpose and Meaning			
Purpose	5.72 (5.56, 5.88)*	**7.25 (7.03, 7.47)***	-0.60
Meaning	6.12 (5.98, 6.27)*	**7.68 (7.49, 7.87)***	-0.69
Character and Virtue			
Promoting Good	7.06 (6.96, 7.17)*	**7.82 (7.67, 7.96)***	-0.44
Delayed Gratification	**7.13 (7.01, 7.26)***	6.49 (6.26, 6.72)*	0.31
Psychological Distress			
Traumatic Distress	0.28 (0.26, 0.31)	0.24 (0.20, 0.28)	0.09
Depression	**0.37 (0.34, 0.39)***	0.11 (0.08, 0.14)*	0.59
Anxiety	**0.35 (0.33, 0.38)***	0.05 (0.03, 0.07)*	0.72
Suffering	**0.42 (0.39, 0.45)***	0.33 (0.28, 0.38)*	0.18
Physical Health			
Self-Rated Physical Health	6.71 (6.58, 6.83)	6.55 (6.34, 6.75)	0.08
Health Limitations	0.18 (0.16, 0.21)*	**0.34 (0.30, 0.39)***	-0.39
Pain	0.33 (0.30, 0.36)*	**0.44 (0.39, 0.49)***	-0.23
Social Wellbeing			
Social Relationship Quality	6.75 (6.62, 6.88)*	**8.21 (8.04, 8.38)***	-0.65
Social Support	8.03 (7.90, 8.17)	**8.51 (8.33, 8.69)***	-0.23
Loneliness	**4.12 (3.97, 4.28)***	2.08 (1.86, 2.31)*	-0.77
Financial Wellbeing			
Financial Stability	6.65 (6.48, 6.82)*	**8.78 (8.60, 8.95)***	-0.76
Material Stability	7.25 (7.08, 7.41)*	**8.53 (8.36, 8.70)***	-0.50

Note. Table 4 shows means for continuous measures and proportions for categorical measures with 95% confidence intervals (CI) for each wellbeing indicator in the youngest and oldest age groups. Non-overlapping CIs are marked with an asterisk (*), with the higher values highlighted in **bold**. Cohen's *d*s are reported to aid interpretation of group differences.

3.4 Gender differences in flourishing

Table 5 compares wellbeing outcomes across gender in Sweden. Men and women reported broadly similar levels of present life evaluation (males vs. females: 7.19 vs. 7.21), happiness (7.01 vs. 7.06), and future life evaluation (7.68 vs. 7.73). Men reported slightly higher at peace (0.84 vs. 0.79) and balance in life (0.83 vs. 0.77), while women reported higher social support (females vs. males: 8.30 vs. 8.02). Reported levels of purpose and meaning were nearly identical. Effect sizes for these indicators were small or negligible.

In contrast, sharper gender gaps appeared in several other flourishing domains. For example, women reported higher traumatic distress (females vs. males: 0.30 vs. 0.21), depression (0.20 vs.

0.16), and anxiety (0.18 vs. 0.13), and suffering (0.39 vs. 0.30). In absolute terms, this corresponds to differences of approximately 4–9 percentage points across indicators of psychological distress. Men rated their physical health more positively (males vs. females: 6.54 vs. 6.27) and were less likely to report pain (0.35 vs. 0.44). Loneliness was slightly higher among women (3.12) compared to men (2.93). Women reported somewhat higher levels of promoting good (7.62 vs. 7.49), whereas men reported higher levels of delayed gratification (7.23 vs. 6.76). Financial stability favored men (males vs. females: 7.41 vs. 7.05), as did material stability (7.58 vs. 7.42). Although the differences were modest, Cohen's *d*s confirmed small but consistent gender disparities in several of the indicators for psychological distress and physical health.

Table 5. *Flourishing in Sweden by gender*

Indicator	Means/Proportions (95% CI) for Males	Means/Proportions (95% CI) for Females	Cohen's *d*
Psychological Wellbeing			
Happiness	7.01 (6.96, 7.06)	7.06 (7.01, 7.11)	-0.03
Present Life Evaluation	7.19 (7.15, 7.24)	7.21 (7.16, 7.26)	-0.01
Future Life Evaluation	7.68 (7.63, 7.72)	7.73 (7.68, 7.78)	-0.03
At peace	**0.84 (0.83, 0.85)***	0.79 (0.78, 0.80)*	0.13
Balance in Life	**0.83 (0.82, 0.84)***	0.77 (0.75, 0.78)*	0.15
Purpose and Meaning			
Purpose	6.69 (6.62, 6.76)	6.62 (6.55, 6.69)	0.03
Meaning	7.02 (6.97, 7.08)	7.10 (7.04, 7.16)	-0.04
Character and Virtue			
Promoting Good	7.49 (7.45, 7.54)*	**7.62 (7.57, 7.67)***	-0.08
Delayed Gratification	**7.23 (7.18, 7.28)***	6.76 (6.70, 6.82)*	0.23
Psychological Distress			
Traumatic Distress	0.21 (0.20, 0.22)*	**0.30 (0.28, 0.31)***	-0.21
Depression	0.16 (0.15, 0.17)*	**0.20 (0.19, 0.21)***	-0.10
Anxiety	0.13 (0.12, 0.14)*	**0.18 (0.17, 0.19)***	-0.14
Suffering	0.30 (0.29, 0.31)*	**0.39 (0.37, 0.40)***	-0.19
Physical Health			
Self-Rated Physical Health	**6.54 (6.49, 6.60)***	6.27 (6.21, 6.33)*	0.13
Health Limitations	0.21 (0.20, 0.23)*	**0.30 (0.29, 0.31)***	-0.21
Pain	0.35 (0.34, 0.36)*	**0.44 (0.43, 0.45)***	-0.18
Social Wellbeing			
Social Relationship Quality	7.17 (7.12, 7.23)	7.28 (7.22, 7.35)	-0.05
Social Support	8.02 (7.97, 8.08)*	**8.30 (8.24, 8.35)***	-0.13
Loneliness	2.93 (2.86, 3.00)*	**3.12 (3.04, 3.19)***	-0.07
Financial Wellbeing			
Financial Stability	**7.41 (7.34, 7.48)***	7.05 (6.97, 7.12)*	0.13
Material Stability	**7.58 (7.51, 7.65)***	7.42 (7.35, 7.49)*	0.06

Note. Table 5 shows means for continuous measures and proportions for categorical measures with 95% confidence intervals (CI) for each wellbeing indicator by gender. Non-overlapping CIs are marked with an asterisk (*), with the higher values highlighted in **bold**. Cohen's *d*s are reported to aid interpretation of group differences.

3.5 Flourishing among foreign-born Swedes

Table 6 compares wellbeing outcomes between native-born and foreign-born Swedes. The two groups reported similar levels of psychological wellbeing. For example, present life evaluation averaged 7.20 among native-born and 7.16 among foreign-born respondents. Self-rated physical health was also comparable (6.40 vs. 6.52). However, native-born Swedes reported slightly higher at peace (0.82 vs. 0.79) and balance in life (0.80 vs. 0.76), while foreign-born respondents reported marginally higher levels of purpose (6.86 vs. 6.64), promoting good (7.72 vs. 7.54), and delayed gratification (7.14 vs. 6.98). For all these comparisons, the 95% confidence intervals overlapped, and the effect sizes were negligible.

Table 6. *Flourishing in Sweden by country of birth (native-born vs. foreign-born)*

Indicator	Means/Proportions (95% CI) for Native-Born	Means/Proportions (95% CI) for Foreign-Born	Cohen's *d*
Psychological Wellbeing			
Happiness	7.03 (6.99, 7.07)	7.03 (6.88, 7.18)	0.00
Present Life Evaluation	7.20 (7.17, 7.24)	7.16 (7.02, 7.29)	0.02
Future Life Evaluation	7.70 (7.66, 7.73)	7.79 (7.66, 7.93)	-0.05
At peace	0.82 (0.81, 0.83)	0.79 (0.76, 0.82)	0.08
Balance in Life	0.80 (0.79, 0.81)	0.76 (0.73, 0.79)	0.10
Purpose and Meaning			
Purpose	6.64 (6.59, 6.69)	6.86 (6.67, 7.05)	-0.09
Meaning	7.06 (7.01, 7.10)	7.07 (6.90, 7.25)	0.00
Character and Virtue			
Promoting Good	7.54 (7.51, 7.58)	7.72 (7.58, 7.85)	-0.11
Delayed Gratification	6.98 (6.94, 7.02)	7.14 (6.97, 7.31)	-0.08
Psychological Distress			
Traumatic Distress	0.25 (0.24, 0.26)*	**0.30 (0.27, 0.34)***	-0.11
Depression	0.18 (0.17, 0.18)*	**0.26 (0.23, 0.29)***	-0.21
Anxiety	0.15 (0.14, 0.16)*	**0.23 (0.20, 0.26)***	-0.22
Suffering	0.34 (0.33, 0.35)	0.38 (0.34, 0.42)	-0.08
Physical Health			
Self-Rated Physical Health	6.40 (6.36, 6.44)	6.52 (6.36, 6.68)	-0.06
Health Limitations	0.26 (0.25, 0.27)	0.26 (0.23, 0.30)	0.00
Pain	0.40 (0.39, 0.41)	0.40 (0.36, 0.44)	0.00
Social Wellbeing			
Social Relationship Quality	7.22 (7.18, 7.27)	7.28 (7.12, 7.44)	-0.03
Social Support	**8.18 (8.14, 8.22)***	7.88 (7.71, 8.06)*	0.14
Loneliness	3.01 (2.96, 3.06)	3.26 (3.04, 3.47)	-0.09
Financial Wellbeing			
Financial Stability	**7.26 (7.21, 7.32)***	6.75 (6.53, 6.97)*	0.18
Material Stability	**7.53 (7.48, 7.58)***	7.08 (6.87, 7.30)*	0.18

Note. Table 6 shows means for continuous measures and proportions for categorical measures with 95% confidence intervals (CI) for each wellbeing indicator for respondents born in Sweden vs. abroad. Non-overlapping CIs are marked with an asterisk (*), with the higher values highlighted in **bold**. Cohen's *d*s are reported to aid interpretation of group differences.

In contrast, more noticeable differences emerged in the domains of psychological distress, social wellbeing, and financial wellbeing. Foreign-born individuals reported higher traumatic distress (foreign-born vs. native-born, 0.30 vs. 0.25), depression (0.26 vs. 0.18), and anxiety (0.23 vs. 0.15), corresponding to absolute differences of approximately 5–8 percentage points. They also reported lower social support (7.88 vs. 8.18), financial stability (6.75 vs. 7.26), and material stability (7.08 vs. 7.53). Although the differences were modest, Cohen's *d*s confirmed small but consistent disadvantages for foreign-born Swedes in psychological distress (depression and anxiety symptoms) and financial wellbeing.

4. Discussion

Drawing on nationally representative data, this study provides a multidimensional assessment of how different sociodemographic groups in Sweden are experiencing their lives. While global happiness rankings often place Sweden near the top (Helliwell et al., 2024; Helliwell et al., 2025), our findings reveal a more complex and uneven picture of multidimensional flourishing among Swedish respondents.

4.1 Where Sweden is doing well…

Sweden stands out in a global comparison in several wellbeing domains. Swedish respondents reported the highest level of life evaluations in the GFS (Lomas et al., 2025b), second only to Israel. Swedes reported markedly lower levels of psychological distress, indicated by lower levels of depression, anxiety, traumatic distress, and suffering, pointing to less severe mental health challenges in Sweden. While Swedish respondents reported slightly lower social relationship quality than the GFS cross-country average, they also indicated higher levels of social support and lower loneliness, countering stereotypes of Sweden as a highly socially isolated society. Sweden ranked first in financial wellbeing among all GFS countries (VanderWeele et al., 2025).

These strengths may reflect the impact of Sweden's comprehensive welfare system, which provides universal access to healthcare, education, elder care, childcare, and parental leave—offering broad economic security and social protection, and may buffer against loneliness (Nyqvist et al., 2019; Oh & Choi, 2024). Additionally, Sweden's relatively high level of income equality may play a role in supporting both financial wellbeing and overall life evaluation, consistent with research linking lower income inequality to higher levels of wellbeing (e.g., Alesina et al., 2004; Oishi et al., 2011).

4.2 …and not so well

However, our findings also point to several notable areas of relative weaknesses. The means for both purpose and meaning were substantially lower in the Swedish sample compared to the pooled estimate for all Wave 1 GFS countries combined. These findings echo earlier research linking a lower sense of purpose and meaning to more secular and wealthy societies (Oishi & Diener, 2014). The pattern also resonates with de Miranda's (2024) work on philosophical health, which suggests that material security without existential coherence can lead to meaning deficits. While somewhat expected in a highly secular country like Sweden, this deficit in existential direction may warrant policy consideration. Character and virtue was another area of relative weakness, with Swedish self-reports below the GFS pooled average on promoting good and delayed gratification. In addition, Swedish respondents tended to report lower self-rated physical health and higher levels of health limitations compared to the pooled GFS average—a somewhat surprising finding given Sweden's high life expectancy and strong healthcare

infrastructure. This result contrasts with prior studies that suggest Swedes are relatively satisfied with their health (OECD, 2025), but it may reflect high personal expectations and cultural norms around optimal health. Finally, it is important to note that Sweden's wellbeing advantages are not equally shared across the population, and significant disparities emerge across demographic groups.

4.3 The age divide: Older Swedes flourish the most

Perhaps the most striking and alarming finding in this national study is the pronounced age gradient in many of the wellbeing indicators we examined. While recent studies have documented an emerging age gap in life evaluations in Sweden over the past few years (Helliwell et al., 2024; Nilsson et al., 2025; Realo & Dobewall, 2011), our results reveal that this divide extends across virtually every domain of flourishing (at least based on the indicators we focused on), and that many of the associated effect sizes are substantial. Similar to other recent findings in Western contexts like the U.S. (e.g., Chen et al., 2022), our findings depart from the commonly observed U-shaped curve of wellbeing across the lifespan cross-sectionally (Blanchflower, 2021) and the relatively flat relationship in longitudinal samples (Buecker et al., 2023), aligning more closely with an S-shaped trajectory.

Our findings suggest that older Swedes are one of the most flourishing groups in one of the world's "happiest" countries. If all Swedes reported life evaluation scores as high as those of the oldest adults, Sweden would have ranked first, rather than fourth, in the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2025). Older Swedes reported consistently higher levels of psychological wellbeing, purpose and meaning, social and financial wellbeing and lower levels of psychological distress compared to younger Swedes. When comparing the values in the youngest group (aged 18-24) to the oldest group (80+), many of the effect sizes, indicated by Cohen's *d*s, were medium to large. For instance, differences between these two groups on indicators of happiness, present life evaluation, meaning, loneliness, and financial stability all had effect sizes around $d = 0.70$ in favor of higher wellbeing among the 80+ age group. Even in domains commonly associated with vulnerability in later life, such as self-rated health and loneliness (Buecker et al., 2021), the oldest group fared better. Notably, their relatively low levels of loneliness stand in contrast to international patterns showing higher loneliness in old age (Surkalim et al., 2022) or no clear age-related patterns (Hawkley et al., 2022; Mund et al., 2020).

One plausible interpretation for this pattern of findings is that older Swedes tend to endorse higher levels of wellbeing on different indicators partly because they have benefited from postwar economic growth, political stability, and well-funded public services throughout their lives. Their higher wellbeing may also reflect the effects of a well-functioning welfare state in recent decades, providing robust pensions, universal healthcare, home care services, and housing support for seniors. If this interpretation holds, it underscores the potential of sustained public investment to foster flourishing across the lifespan. At the same time, we cannot rule out the possibility that older adults might describe wellbeing differently or underreport psychological distress due to stigma, which could bias some of the results.

In contrast, young Swedes reported the lowest levels of wellbeing across various indicators. Although younger individuals typically report higher wellbeing than older adults in many countries, recent data have shown a decrease in youth wellbeing across Western Europe and North America (Helliwell et al., 2024). Still, Sweden is one of only seven countries (out of 143) where individuals under the age of 30 now report the lowest life evaluation scores compared to other age groups in the population (Helliwell et al., 2024), a concerning pattern that is consistently reflected across multiple domains and indicators in our data. To contextualize these findings, if

Sweden were represented solely by this youngest age group, its ranking in the World Happiness Report would drop from fourth to 30th place, falling behind countries such as Lithuania, Belize, and Kosovo (Helliwell et al., 2025).

The youngest Swedes in this study scored lowest on happiness, life evaluation, balance, at peace, purpose, meaning, and financial wellbeing, while reporting the highest levels of psychological distress and loneliness. Particularly notable is the prevalence of anxiety-related symptoms among the youngest Swedes, which appeared up to seven times more common than in older adults. The pronounced distress observed among those in the family-forming age group may help inform the ongoing public debate about Sweden's record-low birth rates (Statistics Sweden, 2025), as such challenges may reduce both the desire and the capacity to start a family.

Several factors may be contributing to this generational divide in wellbeing. One widely discussed hypothesis concerns the role of digitalization and social media. In Sweden, nearly all residents use the internet daily, and social media use is near-universal among school-age children (Swedish Internet Foundation, 2024). However, usage patterns differ by age group. For instance, older Swedes are less likely to report that social media enhances their relationships or fosters connection (Swedish Internet Foundation, 2024). Previous studies also suggest that social media use is negatively related to life satisfaction, and that this relationship is stronger in younger age groups (Orben et al., 2022).

Beyond digital factors, the past decade has been marked by a series of destabilizing global and national events affecting Sweden in one form or another, including the COVID-19 pandemic, more localized geopolitical conflicts (e.g., Russia's invasion of Ukraine), climate anxiety, immigration challenges, terrorism, and gang-related violence. It is plausible that younger Swedes are more vulnerable to these kinds of stressors. In fact, previous studies suggest that older adults tend to prioritize positive over negative information (Charles et al., 2003) and use more adaptive emotion regulation strategies, enabling them to downregulate negative emotions and enhance positive ones (Charles, 2010). In turbulent times, the absence or underdevelopment of such emotion-regulatory resources may help explain why younger Swedes report lower levels of wellbeing.

Life stage factors may also play an important role. Young adulthood is typically marked by major transitions, such as leaving home, entering the workforce, and forming romantic partnerships (Buecker et al., 2023). If these milestones are delayed or disrupted, such as due to destabilizing events, financial strain, or housing shortages, wellbeing may be negatively affected. Recognizing the challenges tied to different life stages can help deepen our understanding of how different aspects of wellbeing are distributed across age groups.

Paradoxically, despite their lower current wellbeing, young Swedes maintain a strikingly optimistic view of their future. On average, young adults expected their life evaluation scores to be remarkably higher in five years than it was at present (8.06 instead of 6.65). This optimism may align with their relatively higher levels of delayed gratification, suggesting that younger Swedes are willing to trade present satisfaction for anticipated future gains. While responses to the promoting good question tended to increase with age, responses for the delayed gratification question tended to decrease with age, with those aged 18-39 reporting notably higher than older Swedish respondents. The disconnect between present experience and future expectations resonates with a famous observation by 1960s Swedish Prime Minister and Social Democrat Tage Erlander about "the disappointment that follows rising expectations" ["de stigande förväntningarnas missnöje"], a phenomenon also recognized as the Tocqueville effect. Could today's youth, with exceptionally high expectations for their lives, be setting themselves up for

dissatisfaction in the present? This gap between ambition and reality may be a critical piece of the broader age-wellbeing puzzle.

It is also worthwhile noting that our cross-sectional data does not find a midlife dip in wellbeing, an element central to the recognized U-shaped pattern of wellbeing (Blanchflower, 2021). The absence of a midlife dip may reflect a buffering effect of Sweden's comprehensive welfare system, including subsidized childcare and eldercare, which may ease the caregiving burdens that tend to peak in midlife. Alternatively, this pattern might be at least partly explained by the particularly low wellbeing among Swedish youth.

In sum, the steep generational gap in wellbeing should be seen as a warning sign. While many older Swedes are thriving, younger Swedes appear to be languishing. This disparity calls for urgent and targeted public attention—not only to address youth mental health—but also to examine the structural and cultural conditions shaping the lives of young people. If Sweden is to maintain its high levels of national wellbeing into the future, understanding and supporting the flourishing of its younger generations must be a central priority.

4.4 Modest disparities: Gender and migration backgrounds

Gender differences in the indicators of wellbeing prioritized in this study were generally modest across most domains, but several notable patterns emerged. Women reported slightly higher social support than men, yet they also consistently experienced greater loneliness, psychological distress, poorer physical health, and lower financial wellbeing. These findings align with official statistics documenting higher levels of mental illness and sickness absence among Swedish women (Public Health Agency of Sweden, n.d.; Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2025). Although not dramatic, these disparities underscore that even in one of the world's most gender-equal societies, differences in wellbeing persist.

Foreign-born individuals in Sweden reported life evaluations comparable to those of native-born Swedes—suggesting a degree of integration in terms of overall life evaluations. However, some disparities emerged in other domains. Immigrants reported higher psychological distress, lower financial wellbeing, lower social support, and higher loneliness. These patterns are consistent with prior research showing that, although foreign-born individuals often report life evaluations comparable to those of native-born (Helliwell et al., 2018), they may nonetheless report higher levels of psychological distress (Johnson et al., 2017). While these differences were generally negligible or small in our sample, with effect sizes ranging from $d = 0.00$ to $d = 0.22$, there may still be value in providing targeted support that complements general welfare provision, with attention to the distinct social, economic, and psychological needs of immigrant populations.

Although Sweden's universalist welfare model and strong commitment to equality provide a robust foundation for the population's wellbeing, our findings may suggest that structural supports do not fully eliminate disparities in lived experience. Notably, the largest effect sizes were observed when comparing different indicators of wellbeing across age groups. Closing the flourishing gap between age groups should therefore be a particular priority.

At the same time, when examining wellbeing indicators by gender or immigration status, some of the most pronounced inequalities appear in psychological distress and financial wellbeing, rather than in broader life evaluation measures. To promote more equitable flourishing across different gender and immigrant status groups, it may be more effective to prioritize minimizing suffering. This could, for example, include addressing mental health and financial challenges faced by women and immigrants. Ensuring that flourishing is truly inclusive

in Sweden will require attention to the specific needs of these groups across multiple dimensions of wellbeing.

4.5 Implications and limitations

Together, these findings challenge the idea that countries ranked near the top in global happiness reports are universally doing better across different domains of flourishing. While Sweden performs very well in many areas and certain population segments (e.g., older adults), there are disparities that warrant attention. Our results also highlight the limitations of using life evaluation as a single metric for national wellbeing. Life evaluation scores in Sweden were fairly consistent across demographic groups (age excluded), yet other domains, such as psychological distress and financial wellbeing, revealed more substantial variation. These findings underscore the importance of adopting a more comprehensive, multidimensional framework for assessing flourishing, which could help to uncover hidden inequalities and identify where targeted interventions may be most needed.

This study is not without limitations. The data were collected through a non-probabilistic, digital opt-in panel. The migration population appears to be underrepresented: only 7% of our sample reported being born abroad, compared to somewhat higher estimates reported by other sources (e.g., OECD, 2024). Although post-stratification weights were applied based on official Swedish demographic data, these weights were derived from 2018 figures and did not include immigration status (Ritter et al., 2024). The use of online panels also raises the possibility of non-response bias. The demographic categories used were also broad; all foreign-born individuals, for example, were grouped together, regardless of country of origin, despite the considerable heterogeneity within this population. These omissions suggest that important nuances in the data may have gone undetected. Future research would benefit from more fine-grained analyses of immigrant subgroups, including for example distinctions by region of origin and length of residence. Moreover, all indicators were self-reported, making them subject to personal interpretation, cultural norms, and common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2024) that could lead to potential response bias. The cross-sectional design further limits our ability to draw causal inferences or disentangle age effects from cohort or period effects. Additionally, we did not examine intersections between key demographic variables, such as age combined with gender, nor did we explore differences based on socioeconomic status, such as educational attainment or employment status (though both variables are available in the Supplementary Materials).

4.6 Conclusions

This study reveals that while Sweden performs strongly in several domains of flourishing, particularly among older adults, not all Swedes are flourishing equally. If flourishing indeed reflects a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good, including the context in which they live, our findings highlight notable disparities—particularly among young adults—that underscore the need for more targeted efforts to promote flourishing across all segments of Swedish society.

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Author Contribution Statement

NHB, AHN, and MD wrote the manuscript with contributions from MN, PJK, OK, TL, BC, YC, RGC, BRJ, and TJV. RNP provided the code for data analysis and conducted the analysis. BRJ and TJV acquired funding, coordinated data collection, participated in survey design, supervised the development of the analytic code and contributed to the review and editing of the manuscript.

Funding

The Global Flourishing Study was supported by funding from the John Templeton Foundation (grant #61665), Templeton Religion Trust (#1308), Templeton World Charity Foundation (#0605), Well-Being for Planet Earth Foundation, Fetzer Institute (#4354), Well Being Trust, Paul L. Foster Family Foundation, and the David and Carol Myers Foundation.

Conflict of interest statement

Tyler J. VanderWeele reports consulting fees from Gloo Inc., along with shared revenue received by Harvard University in its license agreement with Gloo Inc. according to the University IP policy. Other authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This project was ruled exempt by the Baylor University Institutional Review Board (#1841317-2). All personally identifiable information was removed from the data used in this study by Gallup Inc. Institutional Review Board approval for all data collection activities was obtained by Gallup Inc.

AI statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted copy editing to enhance readability and to ensure the text is free of grammatical and spelling errors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this article are openly available on the Open Science Framework and in the Supplementary Materials. The specific dataset used was Wave 1 non-sensitive global data available from February 2024 to March 2026 via preregistration and publicly available thereafter (https://www.cos.io/gfs-access-data).

Publishing timeline

Received 4 November 2025
Revised version received 12 December 2025
Accepted 17 December 2025
Published 1 January 2026

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