

Moving in Later Life: The Effects of Internal Mobility on Subjective Well-Being in Europe

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Short Abstract

In ageing European societies, understanding the determinants of well-being in later life is increasingly important. While the relationship between ageing and subjective well-being (SWB) has been widely studied, the role of geographical mobility in shaping older adults' well-being remains underexplored.

This paper examines how internal migration affects life satisfaction and perceived health among individuals aged 50–74 in selected European countries. Using longitudinal data from SHARE and SHARELIFE (waves 1–9), we combine retrospective and prospective information to compare individuals' well-being before and after relocation. Two types of moves are distinguished: interregional and local.

Within-person fixed-effects models are estimated to assess the impact of migration trajectories on SWB, net of time-invariant individual characteristics. Additional analyses include indicators of depressive symptoms and activity limitations to test robustness and explore underlying mechanisms.

Preliminary findings show that migration in later life is associated with higher life satisfaction, particularly following interregional moves, whereas perceived health exhibits weaker and less consistent improvements. Time since migration plays a key role: life satisfaction tends to rise shortly after relocation, while perceived health improves more gradually over time.

Long Abstract

1. Introduction and rationale

In rapidly ageing societies, understanding the determinants of well-being in later life has become an issue of growing importance. A substantial body of research has explored the relationship between ageing and subjective well-being, examining how life satisfaction and emotional stability evolve across the life course (Bowling and Dieppe 2005; Mroczek and Spiro 2005). However, much less attention has been paid to how geographical relocation affects older adults' well-being and quality of life. The intersection between internal migration and subjective well-being remains largely underexplored, particularly from a longitudinal perspective.

One of the earliest contributions to this field is the study of Thai migrant workers by De Jong and colleagues (2002), which, building on the classical cost–benefit framework of migration decisions (Ziegler and Britton 1981), found that recent migration was significantly associated with a short-term decline in life satisfaction. Subsequent research on subjective well-being (SWB) and happiness similarly observed that both internal and international migrants often experience reduced well-being immediately after relocation, mainly due to the loss of social networks and the psychological costs of adaptation (Bartram 2011; Knight and Gunatilaka 2010; Stillman et al. 2015).

In the European context, the general pattern remains similar, although more recent studies offer a deeper understanding of the mechanisms involved. Ivlevs (2014, 2015) investigated the relationship between life satisfaction and international migration intentions, highlighting the importance of individual characteristics such as health, optimism, and social skills. His findings show that happiness tends to decline during the preparation phase for migration, while destination countries are more likely to attract satisfied individuals, who also tend to be more productive. Using data from 35 European and former USSR countries, Ivlevs (2015) identified a clear U-shaped relationship between life satisfaction and migration intentions, a pattern also evident at the macro level when comparing national emigration rates and average happiness (Ivlevs 2014).

While these studies focus primarily on *migration intentions* and pre-migration dynamics, much less is known about how actual moves—particularly internal relocations—affect subjective well-being after the migration has taken place. Understanding post-migration adjustment is particularly relevant in later life, when relocation decisions often intersect with changes in health, family ties, and living arrangements.”

This article contributes to the literature by comparing migrants' satisfaction and perceived health before and after relocation, thereby making full use of the potential of panel data to capture individual change over time across several European countries.

2. Data and method

Data were drawn from the SHARE European surveys. By combining repeated panel waves from SHARE (waves 1-9, excluding wave 3), it is possible to measure multiple subjective dimensions of individuals' lives while minimizing recall bias. The core SHARE survey provides longitudinal information on individuals' evolving life circumstances—particularly family status, health, and attitudes—whereas the retrospective modules (waves 3 and 7), known as SHARELIFE, make it possible to reconstruct key life events, including the timing of migration.

All available waves (1–9) were merged into a single dataset. To ensure reliable information on migration, the analysis includes respondents who participated in at least one SHARELIFE interview, as well as those observed in more than one regular SHARE wave and who reported a change of residence between waves. The dataset was reshaped into long format, and the analytical sample was restricted to individuals aged 50 to 74. This age range was selected to focus on mid- to late-life individuals, for whom relocation decisions are often associated with retirement, health changes, or family transitions. The period of observation spans from 2004 to 2022, covering nine SHARE waves across multiple European countries.

The analysis focuses on two key indicators of subjective well-being: life satisfaction (LS) and perceived health (PH). While LS represents the more comprehensive measure of overall well-being, it is not available on the first wave of SHARE. PH, on the other hand, offers a more complete longitudinal coverage but primarily reflects the medical dimension of well-being rather than its broader subjective aspects.

After data cleaning and case selection, the analytical sample includes 9,022 observations for 1,103 individuals.

Each respondent was classified according to the year of the interview, the timing of internal migration, and the trajectory of change associated with the move. Specifically, individuals were first identified as *pre-migrants* (before relocation), and then distinguished between *interregional movers*—those who relocated across NUTS-2 regions—or *local movers*—those who moved within the same NUTS-2 region. Two trajectory variables were subsequently computed to capture changes in well-being before and after migration.

The “Area trajectory” variable captures changes in population density across areas, distinguishing

between moves to more populated, similarly populated, or less populated regions. The “Household trajectory” variable, instead, reflects changes in household composition, classifying individuals according to whether the number of co-residents increased, remained stable, or decreased following relocation.

Within-person fixed-effects models were estimated to assess the impact of time and migration trajectories on the evolution of life satisfaction and perceived health among movers, while controlling for the most common socio-demographic characteristics. In a second step, additional variables related to well-being—such as symptoms of depression and limitations in activities of daily living—were included. This served both to explore the mechanisms linking these factors to the subjective indicators analysed and to perform robustness checks on the results.

3. Preliminary results

Preliminary results reveal several noteworthy patterns. Migration has a positive effect on life satisfaction in both cases, with an estimated increase of 0.29 for long-range moves and 0.13 for local relocations. Shifting to perceived health, the effect appears less pronounced. It is not statistically significant for interregional moves, while a weak positive association is found for local relocations (significant at $\alpha = 0.1$). However, interpreting these coefficients without accounting for time-to-migration would be misleading. Figure 1 shows that for life satisfaction, the overall stronger positive effect observed for interregional migrations is confirmed, with the only exception being the year of migration itself, when the positive increase is not statistically significant. In contrast, local moves do not display any clear temporal pattern, suggesting that time exerts little or no influence within this subgroup.

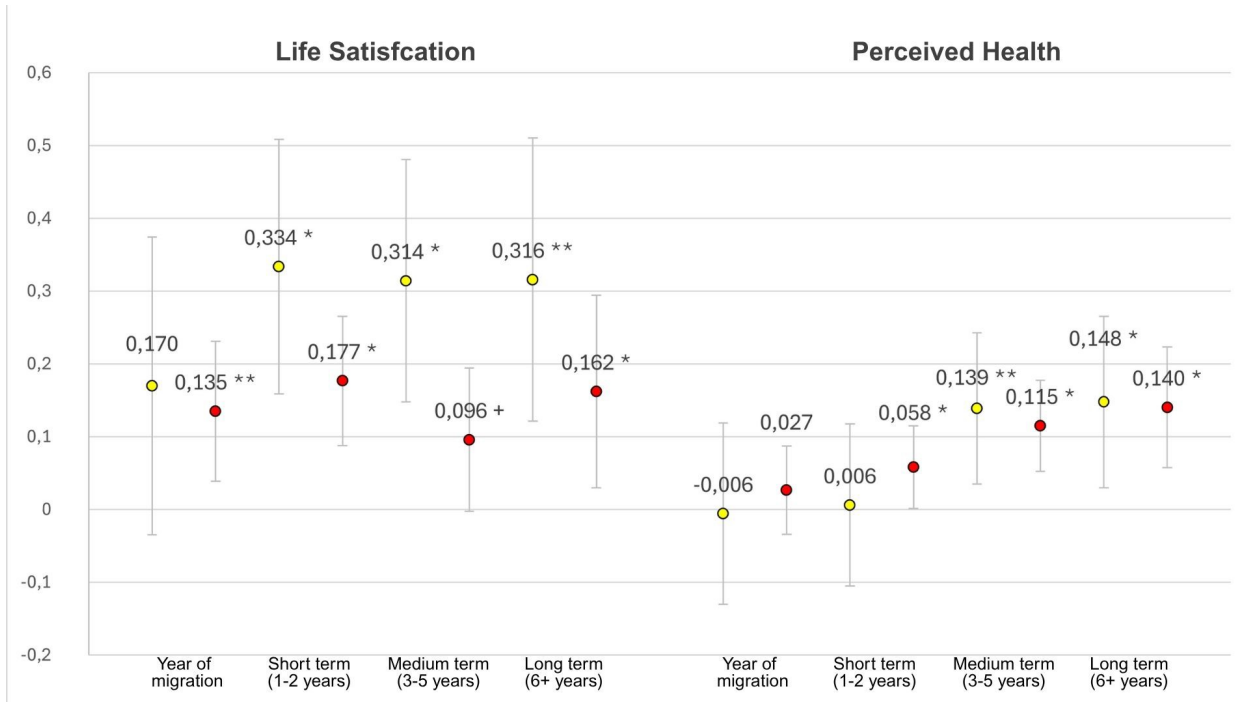
The case of perceived health is particularly noteworthy, as the inclusion of time substantially alters the previous results. Findings indicate a strong relationship between perceived health and the passage of time: the longer the period since migration, the better the self-reported health among respondents. No major differences are observed between the two types of migration.

Overall, these preliminary findings suggest that internal mobility in later life can be associated with improved well-being, although the magnitude and persistence of these effects vary by distance of move and temporal proximity to migration.

Further analyses will integrate trajectory variables and perform additional robustness checks to better assess the impact of internal mobility on subjective well-being.

Figure 1. Estimated effects of migration on life satisfaction and perceived health, by time relative to

migration and type of move (interregional move, in yellow, or local move, in red).



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