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## **Active ageing in an affluent society – Trends in activity patterns among the ‘young old’ in Switzerland**

### **Introduction**

This research paper describes trends in selected social, cultural and physical activities among persons aged 65-74 in Switzerland. The aim is to analyse how far younger cohorts of elderly women and men lead a more active life than earlier cohorts. The chosen context is an affluent society and it is well known that active ageing is primarily observed among affluent groups of elderly. But even within affluent societies it is not always clear, how far active ageing has expanded. Or is it just a post-modern concept based on the behaviour of small elites of elderly persons?

### **Financial situation and subjective health – contextual differences**

Economic security, health and active social participation at higher ages are strongly interrelated (Sirven et al. 2013). A good health and a secure economic situation are major conditions for active ageing. The economic and health conditions of the elderly – and the social basis for active ageing - vary strongly within Europe. Table 1 illustrates this fact by indicating the proportion of respondents aged 65-74 experiencing a good subjective health and a comfortable economic situation in different European countries.

Relatively high values concerning subjective health and the financial situation of households are observed in North and Western European countries. In Norway and the Netherlands more than sixty percent of the young old live comfortably. In other countries (United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland) around half of the respondents feel financially secure. Much lower values (around a third) are observed in France and Italy. Even less affluence and widespread poverty among the elderly in East and South-East Europe (Hungary, Bulgaria).

Significant differences are also observed regarding subjective health. In increasing more European countries a substantial majority of respondents aged 65-74 declare to be in good health (and in many European countries the proportion with good subjective health has increased in the last twenty years).

Socio-economic conditions and health in old age are strongly interrelated. Looking at individual data we found 2012 a positive correlation ( $r = 0.39$ ,  $N: 6914$ ) between subjective health and feelings of living comfortable among elderly respondents (65-74 years of age. A similar correlation ( $r: 0.31$ ,  $N: 3508$ ) was also found in the survey 2023/24). While 70% of respondents in comfortable financial situation estimate to be in good health, this is only the case for 30% of respondents living in difficult financial situations.

Within Europe the socio-economic conditions for a healthy and active ageing vary strongly. Concepts or ideals about active ageing reflect actually primarily the situation of affluent elderly in prosperous societies or regions.

**Table 1:**  
**Feelings about own economic situation and subjective health among respondents aged 65-74 in different European countries**

Country	Respondents aged 65-74:				Subjective health:			
	Feelings about economic situation:				% -good/			
	% -living comfortably							
	2002	2016	2018	2023/24	2002	2016	2018	2023/24
Norway	61%	70%	70%	67%	59%	68%	65%	67%
Netherlands	54%	59%	61%	68%	65%	65%	58%	62%
Switzerland	42%	58%	52%	47%	74%	77%	79%	69%
United Kingdom	44%	53%	54%	52%	61%	66%	66%	54%
Ireland	37%	45%	44%	48%	70%	70%	75%	70%
Germany	30%	44%	44%	51%	38%	51%	51%	51%
France	-	42%	29%	38%*	47%	53%	48%	57%*
Slovenia	29%	35%	36%	45%	27%	40%	43%	43%
Austria	31%	31%	33%	37%	49%	53%	57%	57%
Finland	17%	22%	25%	28%	36%	50%	58%	47%
Italy			26%	31%*			45%	60%*
Portugal	5%	11%	-	11%*	21%	29%	-	29%*
Czech Rep.	4%	4%	9%	11%*	23%	26%	40%	41%*
Hungary	4%	3%	7%	9%	16%	20%	34%	34%
Bulgaria	-		1%	3%			31%	43%

Feelings about household income nowadays: living comfortably on present income, coping on present income, difficult/very difficult on present income.

\* Data from 2021/22

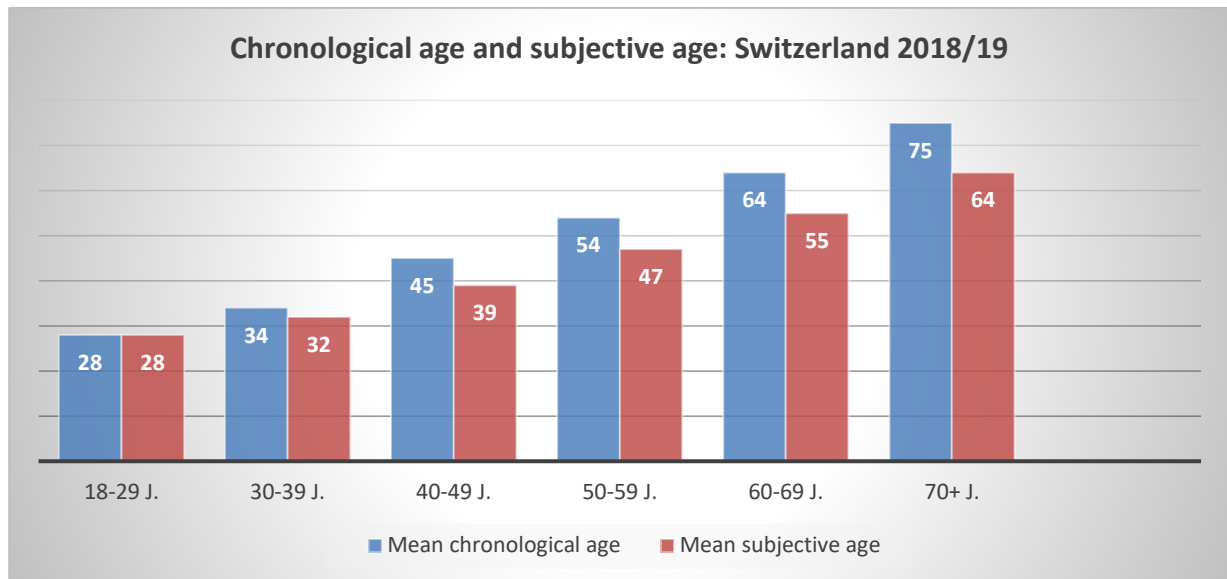
Source: European Social Survey Data .Data file edition 1.0. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway - Data Archive and distributor of ESS data. (Own analysis, weighted data). N per country: 150 to 461 respondents aged 65-74).

### **The ,young old‘ in Switzerland – values and educational background**

The ambiguous term of the ‘young old’ – as well as the development of the concept of a ‘third age’ (Laslett 1989) – indicates changing images and norms regarding later stages of life. In this context many men and women aged 65-74 do not define themselves as being ‘old’ in the classical sense of deficit-oriented images of old age (Wettstein et al. 2023).

Recent Swiss studies indicate a strong tendency of elderly men and women to perceive themselves as significantly younger as their chronological age. In a survey from 2014 a large majority of respondents 60 to 70 years of age identified themselves with a much younger subjective age (Samochowiec et. al. 2015). A survey 2017 among persons aged 50+ (mean age: 68) in four Swiss cantons supported this observation: Only a fifth of all respondents identified with their chronological age (and only 5% felt to be subjectively older as their chronological age). Nearly 70% felt to be younger and 84% had the impression that other persons perceived them as younger as their chronological age (Schicka; Uggowitz 2017). An Online-Survey 2018/19 showed similar differences between factual (chronological) age and subjective age (and feelings of being younger as real age start after 30). In this survey only 15% of respondents aged 70+ defined themselves as being old. A survey 2021 among men and women aged 80 and

more indicated that even among this group a majority (57%) estimated themselves to be subjective younger (Borkowsky 2022: 99).



Source: Berner Generationenhaus 2019) Altersbilder der Gegenwart, Bern (Online-Survey in German-speaking Switzerland).

In this context many elderly Swiss men and women identify themselves with post-modern values of having permanently new ideas and the importance of trying new things in life. Comparing the value of having new ideas and being creative between younger and older respondents, actually only relatively small differences between the age-groups can be observed. To be innovative and adaptive to new ideas are human values that for a majority of Swiss respondents aged 65-74 remain personally important even after retirement. New generations of the ‘young old’ emphasize a pattern of ‘old and innovative’ as a new frame of reference. The lower proportion of elderly finding it important to try new and different things in life indicates that – at least for some men and women – new ideas do not necessarily mean new activities (a group that can be defined as ‘reluctant innovators’). Detailed analysis shows a strong association between personal identification with post-modern values and the socio-economic situation; indicating that post-modern life values among the ‘young old’ are concentrated among the more affluent elderly.

Tab. 2:

**Identification with post-modern values: Switzerland 2012 and 2023/24**

Age group:		25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Important to think new ideas and being creative	2012	63%	66%	70%	71%	57%	50%
	2023/24	63%	64%	65%	61%	63%	53%
Important to try new and different things in life	2012	60%	43%	48%	45%	46%	38%
	2023/24	52%	45%	38%	41%	41%	32%

Source: European Social Survey Round 8 Data. Data file edition 1.0. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway - Data Archive and distributor of ESS data (weighted data)

An important societal determinant of changing values among the elderly is the expansion of higher education during the last decades. The ageing baby-boomers are profiting from the silent educational revolution that started in the 1960s. The percentage of elderly without vocational training has substantially declined, particularly among women (and will decline further in the next generations). A very similar development has been observed in Germany (Karl 2012).

Tab. 3

**Proportion of elderly men and women with high educational attainment 2000 and 2022**

		Age group	
		55-64	65-74
Proportion with tertiary education*			
Men	2000	30%	24%
	2022	40%	38%
Women	2000	7%	5%
	2022	29%	11%

\* University and higher professional education.

Source: BFS – Swiss Labor Surveys (SAKE)

Higher educational attainment has many long-term effects: Better educated people earn higher wages and higher old-age pensions, resulting in a better health and a higher psychic well-being in old age. Overall, we find indications that newer generations of the elderly are better educated and have better health than earlier generations. This could be a good structural basis for more social activities after retirement.

### **Selected activities among the ‘young old’ – observed trends**

In the following section we look at different forms of activities among respondents 65-74 years of age at different time-periods (as far as data are available). This gives an indication how far new generations of elderly men and women are - as expected - more active than earlier generations

### **Physical and sporting activities**

Numerous studies prove that regular physical activities are a major factor in enhancing healthy aging (Miko et al. 2020). As far as valid data are available, we find that today more women and men aged 65-74 are regularly physically active (or at least normatively oriented towards regular physical activities). Since the 1990s about 40% to 50% of persons aged 65+ mention to be regularly physical active. However, the proportion of physical active elderly varies according to sampling strategies and questionnaires. Surveys oriented toward sporting activities show higher values than general survey with only rudimentary questions on sport. At the end of the 1970s walking was the preferred and often only regular physical activity of the elderly. Today more women and men mention gymnastics, structured physical activities or other sporting activities. (Höpflinger 2021).

A trend toward a physically more active ageing is supported by data from the Swiss micro-census on health and health behaviour: Between 2002 and 2022 the percentage of physically

active elderly has increased and the proportions of physically inactive elderly show declining values, even at higher ages. As regular sporting activities are in modern society defined as a major determinant for a long healthy life-expectancy the answers of some elderly respondents can to some degree reflect normative dimensions (resulting in an overestimation of the regularity of sporting activities). When physical active ageing becomes a social norm, answers to survey questions can reflect both factual behaviour and normative ideals.

#### Physical activities among elderly persons in Switzerland 2002-2022

		Persons living in private households			
		Men		Women	
		65-74	75+	65-74	75+
Physically active	2002	70%	52%	50%	34%
	2012	82%	65%	71%	51%
	2022	83%	73%	78%	60%
Physically inactive	2002	20%	36%	30%	49%
	2012	6%	22%	13%	33%
	2022	7%	14%	9%	23%

Physically active: at least 150 minutes per week of moderate physical activity or at least twice a week intensive physical activity; Physically inactive: less than 30 minutes per week moderate physical activity and less than once per week intensive physical activity; Third category (not shown): 30 to 149 minutes per week moderate physical activity or at least once a week intensive physical activity

Source: Swiss micro census on health and health behaviour 2002 and 2017 (weighted data)

The most popular sporting activities among physical active elderly men and women are walking/hiking, swimming and bicycle rides. Women are active regarding gymnastics or dancing, while men more often mention skiing or fitness training. Not yet often mentioned are age-related weight and muscle training (as recommended by geriatrics).

#### Most popular sporting activities among sporting active elderly in Switzerland 2020

	Women		Men	
	65-74	75+	65-74	75+
Walking/hiking	65%	44%	69%	56%
Swimming	39%	26%	35%	24%
Bicycle rides (without mountain biking)	36%	23%	44%	35%
Gymnastics	20%	27%	10%	20%
Yoga, Pilates	19%	12%	7%	6%
Skiing	16%	2%	30%	11%
Fitness training	13%	7%	16%	9%
Jogging/running	12%	7%	14%	10%
Dancing	12%	11%	6%	4%
Weight/ muscle training	7%	1%	9%	4%

Source: Lamprecht et al. 2020.

## Further education and lifelong learning

Lifelong learning – emphasized since the 1970s – is seen as central element for successful ageing (either for slowing down cognitive decline or to adapt productively to retirement). Further education even after retirement seems particularly important in periods of rapid social, cultural and technological changes (Kolland, 2016: 3).

Lifelong learning as well as further education after retirement vary strongly, depending on earlier education and actual interests. Generally elderly men and women with high educational status participate more often in forms of formal learning (courses, congresses etc.) than persons with low educational status (Kolland et al., 2018). For example, in 2023 about forty percent of participants at courses of Swiss Senior Citizen's Universities were before retirement in research or educational professions active (Schweiz. Verband der Seniorinnen- und Seniorenuniversitäten 2023).

The data on educational participation or learning processes of elderly in Switzerland are, however, very deficient. One reason is that persons are not able to give valid information on their learning behaviour, particularly regarding informal educational activities (learning by books, learning new information through the internet etc.). In addition to, the answers vary according to the form of questions and the asked for period (for example: participation at educational courses during the last 12 months or the last four weeks) (Höpflinger 2022).

### Participation in (further) education in Switzerland

#### A) Participation rates in the last 12 months 2016

Age-group:	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-75
Education	69%	18%	5%	4%	1%	0
Further education	64%	76%	70%	68%	57%	32%
Informal learning*	41%	51%	45%	40%	38%	29%
Non-learners	8%	13%	21%	24%	34%	54%

#### B) Participation in further education outside formal educational system \*\* in the last 4 weeks (2010-2019)

Age-group:	2010	2015	2023
50-54	29%	29%	24%
55-59	26%	26%	22%
60-64	19%	20%	15%
65-69	13%	15%	8%
70-74	10%	12%	6%

\*Informal learning: activities that are oriented to learning something new, but are organised outside institutional learning contexts (like reading specialist literature, learning from family members, friends etc.)

\*\* Further education through conferences, workshops or lectures

Source: A: Bundesamt für Statistik 2018, B: Swiss Labour Force Survey

Regarding formal educational courses we observe in the last decades only a slight increase in the proportion of elderly participating. Since the 1990s the participation rate of retired persons in formal educational courses varies from 13% to 15%. The same seems true for informal

learning (learning by books, learning from friends. In any case even today only a minority of older men and women are involved in further education, either because the retired have to pay for education or because there is a lack of public educational structures for older people (Campiche; Kuzeawu 2017). Even when informal learning processes are considered, we still have a large proportion of the elderly that can be classified as “non-learners” (Bundesamt für Statistik 2018).

According to an Education Study (Seifert et al. 2021), in 2020 the most preferred forms of learning are on-site offers with active participation - such as lectures with discussions, active project work or excursions. Overall, intrinsic motives (such as "dealing with a new topic") are more likely than extrinsic motives (such as external social pressure, achievement orientation) to motivate participation among retired persons. This was also reflected in a survey conducted in 2023 of participants at senior citizens' universities and adult education centres, with women attaching greater importance to intrinsic learning motives than men. For example, meeting new people or looking for new inspirations was more important for women than for men. Women also preferred more often artistic and design topics as well as learning new languages than men. Men on the other hand were more likely to be interested in scientific and technical as well as historical and socio-political topics (Schweiz. Verband der Seniorinnen- und Seniorenuniversitäten 2023).

Overall, the trend to further education after retirement is less clear than could be expected. And participation rates of elderly persons in formal courses is strongly related to earlier educational achievements. The Covid-19-pandemie resulted in the second quarter of 2020 to a reduced participation of retired people in courses, conferences or third age university lectures. While in the second quarter of 2019 according to labour force survey data 17% of the 65-69-years old indicated further education in the last four weeks, in the second quarter of 2020 the participation rate was reduced to 8%.

## Cultural activities

Detailed information on cultural activities in Switzerland were collected 2014 and 2019 through two micro census (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020). According to this survey a substantial majority of men and women aged 60 to 74 are culturally active (2014: 58%, 2019: 62%). The strongest social differences of cultural activities of retired people relate to educational status: While 2014 65% of people aged 65+ with tertiary education were culturally engaged, this was the case for only 39% of people aged 65+ with low educational attainment. Creativity in old age is strongly concentrated among higher educational classes.

### Own cultural activities 2014 und 2019

%- practiced a given activity in the last 12 months

	60-74		75+	
	2014	2019	2014	2019
To sing (alone/in groups)	19%	21%	20%	22%
Photography (as amateur)*	18%	20%	10%	12%
Drawing/painting/sculpting	16%	17%	10%	13%
Writing (diary, stories, etc.)	14%	16%	13%	15%
To play an instrument	13%	15%	10%	9%
Creative work on/with computer	9%	9%	4%	5%
Handicrafts (pottery, etc.)	9%	10%	6%	8%
To dance	6%	7%	3%	4%
Making films/videos *	4%	8%	3%	4%
Amateur theatre	2%	2%	1%	1%
Rap/poetry slam	1%	1%	0	0
Graffiti/street Art	0	1%	0	0
<b>Total culturally active</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>53%</b>

\*= without family/holiday snaps/films.

0% = less than 0.5%

Source: Bundesamt für Statistik 2020.

The cultural activity most mentioned relates to music (singing, playing an instrument). More than a third of the 60 to 74 years old are musically active. In second place – at least among retired men – is taking photos. Generally, older men have more often technical hobbies (like creative work on computers, filming, taking photos etc.) than women. Women on the other hand mention more often writing and dancing. Post-modern activities like Rap, Blogging etc. are for the moment rarely mentioned by older persons.

Looking at further cultural activities – visiting museums, historical places, concerts, theatre, cinema, local festivities etc. – we find a broad interest for active or passive cultural activities, particularly among the younger retirees, but also among a majority of people aged 75+. From 2014 to 2019 those activities show a slight increase. However, the Covid-19-Pandemie interrupted 2020/21 many of those activities.

When 2019 asked about experienced obstacles for visiting cultural events, 13% of the 60-74 years old and 45% of respondents aged 75+ mentioned old age respectively health problems (60-74: 12%, 75+: 33%).



## Visiting cultural institutions and leisure events

### A) Cultural institutions

	Age:	% - visiting in the last 12 months			
		60-74		75+	
		2014	2019	2014	2019
Museum/exhibition		68%	68%	52%	52%
Monument/historical place		66%	70%	44%	49%
Concerts/music event		66%	69%	52%	55%
Theatre		54%	53%	39%	42%
Cinema		48%	53%	28%	35%
Cabaret/circus/light show		44%	47%	27%	27%
Library/media library		29%	31%	22%	22%
Festival (all kinds)		23%	33%	9%	16%
Ballet/dance performance-		23%	25%	17%	16%
Virtual visit (museum/monument)		17%	19%	9%	9%

### B) Leisure events

	Age:	% - visiting in the last 12 months			
		60-74		75+	
		2014	2019	2014	2019
Village, neighbourhood or club festivals		75%	75%	66%	64%
Traditional festival (carnival etc.)		63%	64%	53%	54%
Sport events		35%	38%	25%	22%
Discos or nightclubs		10%	12%	2%	4%

Source: Bundesamt für Statistik (2020)

## Musical activities of the elderly in Switzerland 2000-2019

	% - at least once a week			
	Women		Men	
	65-74	75+	65-74	75+
Singing/playing an instrument				
2000	14%	10%	13%	10%
2006	20%	15%	19%	12%
2016	23%	19%	16%	15%
2019/20	24%	16%	23%	17%

Source: Swiss household panel data (own calculations)

Overall, a substantial majority of the elderly in Switzerland are culturally active. The cultural interests and activities after retirement are very diverse and clearly vary with educational level and gender. In many cases cultural activities and hobbies at earlier life periods continue after retirement. As far as data exist, today elderly seem to be culturally more and longer active than earlier generations. The proportion of women and men who are regularly musically engaged (singing, playing an instrument) has significantly increased.

## Digital world – Internet use

Technological changes affect also older men and women. Both digital communications as modern household technologies allow elderly persons to compensate for physical deficits (as illustrated by hearing aids, digital memory assistance or automatic alarm after falls etc.) (Künemund, Fachinger 2018). Digital communication allows less mobile family members regular contacts with adult children or grandchildren living abroad.

With a certain time-lag in Switzerland the older generations have adapted well to modern digital media and digital communication. The proportion of older women and men regularly using the Internet is still lower than among younger persons, but at least the ‘young old’ have rapidly closed the intergenerational digital gap. The Covid-19-pandemie has accelerated the use of digital apps among older generations.

### Regular use of Internet by age-group in Switzerland

%-regularly use the internet (several times a week)

Age-group:	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Oct. 1999-march 2000	37%	30%	26%	20%	8%	1%
Oct. 2005-march 2006	80%	74%	70%	58%	37%	10%
Oct. 2010-march 2011	96%	91%	86%	77%	61%	25%
Oct. 2016-march 2017	99%	98%	94%	86%	76%	46%
Oct. 2019-march 2020	99%	99%	98%	93%	79%	53%

To note: Data before and after autumn 2012 are based on slightly different methods

Source: MA-Net, Net-Metrix-Base (Bundesamt für Statistik).

Detailed analysis confirms that even today the use of internet decreases with age, in some cases due to functional disabilities. In old age the use of internet is significantly associated with educational status. In addition to, the general affinity for technology is important (and some old men and women regard it as pointless to adapt to new ways of communication) (Seifert et al. 2020). In any case, we observe in Switzerland less a digital divide between the generations as a certain digital divide within the older generations.

## Voluntary work

In the last decades voluntary work after retirement has been promoted to compensate for the loss of professional challenges or to achieve meaningful social contacts in later life etc. Such arguments are supported by theories on the values of a socially active ageing. At the same time, the socio-economic value of voluntary work – provided by retired men and women in a demographically ageing society - has been emphasized, for example to fill gaps in social support) (Kolland, Gallistl 2020).

How far the proportion of older women and men engaged in voluntary work has increased or decreased in the last decades in Switzerland, cannot be clearly answered as the measured extent of voluntary work is strongly dependent on the survey methods and survey questions used. This is particularly the case for non-organized, informal forms of voluntary engagements. The results of surveys with questions on voluntary work organized in Switzerland are difficult to compare. As far as can be ascertained the proportion of persons engaged in voluntary work in Switzerland has been more or less stable (Lamprecht et al. 2020: 9). And this seems also be true for retired

people. Depending on the survey methods of the last two decades around 40% to 50% of the persons aged 65-74 were engaged in one form or the other in voluntary work (men more often in organized voluntary work, women more often informally engaged). Of people aged 75+ living at home 20% to 30% were voluntary engaged in the last two decades.

### **Voluntary work of the elderly population – according to different surveys**

<b>A) ‘Young old’</b>		% -voluntary work in the last 4 weeks			Source:
<u>Labour force survey</u>		Total	formal	informal	
2000	65-74	43%	19%	32%	1
2004	65-74	47%	23%	34%	1
2007	65-74	44%	21%	31%	1
2013	65-74	41%	21%	28%	1
2016	65-74	53%	23%	43% *	1
2020	65-74	45%	17%	37% *	+
<u>Voluntary Work Monitor</u>					
2006	65-79			38%	2
2006	Men 65-79	-	23%	33%	2
	Women 65-79		14%	42%	2
2016	65-74		36%	41%	3
2019	60-74		45%	34%	4
2020	Men 60-74 J.		48%	32%	5
	Women 60-74 J.		43%	34%	5
<b>B) Persons aged 75+ (living at home)</b>					
		Total	formal	informal	Source:
<u>Labour force survey</u>	2000	23%	9%	16%	1
	2004	26%	12%	17%	1
	2007	23%	11%	15%	1
	2013	21%	10%	15%	1
	2016	30%	11%	23% *	1
	2020	25%	9%	20% *	1
<u>Voluntary Work-Monitor</u>					
	2016		22%	27%	3
	2019		37%	28%	4
	2020	Men 75+ J.	36%	25%	5
		Women 75 + J.	39%	29%	5

\* To note: 2016 new form of question on informal voluntary work

Formal: Voluntary work within clubs or other organizations, informal: engagements outside organizations or clubs, without engagements for family members.

Source: 1: Bundesamt für Statistik, Schweizerische Arbeitskräfteerhebungen, Modul ‚Unbezahlte Arbeit‘. 2: Freiwilligen-Monitor 2006, Stadelmann-Steffen et al. 2007, 3: Freiwilligen-Monitor 2016 (own data analysis), 4: Freiwilligen-Monitor 2019, vgl. Lamprecht et al. 2020, 5: Freiwilligen-Monitor (detailed analysis, own calculations).

As expected particularly formal voluntary work after retirement is strongly associated with educational status. Persons with tertiary education are more often engaged than persons with low educational status; a social difference observed in all Swiss voluntary work surveys (Stadelmann-Steffen et al. 2007; Lamprecht et al. 2020). In old age functional disabilities can impede voluntary activities. According to household panel data 2017/18 40% of the respondents

older than 64 years of age with very good subjective health were formally engaged, compared to 18% with bad subjective health.

Overall, we do not observe a clear trend to increasing participation rates in voluntary work among the retired population. As due to demographic ageing the number of retired men and women has substantially increased, even constant participation rates imply, however, an increased absolute number of socially engaged elderly persons.

### **Social relationships – confidants and friends**

Social relationships are in all life phases a central element of social integration and an important determinant of well-being. Very important in later stages of life is particularly the existence of confidants who give moral or practical support. The lack of confidants is a critical indicator in old age and related to increased risks of depressive symptoms (Schwartz, Litwin 2017). Confidants can be family members but also non-family members.

In recent Swiss surveys the proportion of elderly persons who say not to have any confidants is lower than ten percent. However, as socially isolated old people are less prepared to participate in surveys, the results can be biased (and the proportion of elderly without confidants could be higher than this survey data indicate).

#### **Confidants**

Question: Do you have persons with which you can discuss at any time personal problems?

		Persons living at home					
		Men			Women		
		55-64	65-74	75+	55-64	65-74	75+
Yes, different persons	1992	50%	51%	54%	62%	57%	56%
	2022	66%	66%	63%	77%	71%	66%
Yes, one person	1992	40%	41%	39%	29%	33%	34%
	2022	29%	29%	31%	20%	23%	28%
No	1992	10%	8%	7%	9%	10%	10%
	2022	5%	5%	6%	3%	6%	8%

Source: Schweiz. Gesundheitsbefragungen (Swiss health surveys)

Overall, we find no indication that – as pessimistic social discourses suggest - the proportion of elderly without confidant persons has increased in the last three decades. Comparing the results of the Swiss health surveys 1992 and 2022 indicates even a slight reduction in the proportion of people aged 65-74 without confidants. The strongest change is the fact that the proportion of elderly mentioning more than one confidant persons has increased (both among men and women).

In many cases family members are the prime source of social support in old age (for example adult children and grandchildren). Non-family contacts, however, can be important, for example to compensate for the lack of family members among single or childless old persons. Friends – particularly of the same generation – can also be important for family-oriented

persons (to discuss family problems or to refer to past experiences etc.). While family members are given, friends can be chosen and friendships are more based on voluntary social actions than family relationships. For such reasons close friends are often persons of the same age-group or persons with similar life-styles or interests. For example, according to the 2023 Swiss Friendship Study, half of the friends listed are no more than three years younger or older than the person surveyed and they are of the same gender in four out of five cases. The proportion of people who do not mention intergenerational friendships increases with increasing age (see Samochowiec, Bauer 2023. 31)

The definition of a ‘close friend’ and the meaning of friendships varies socio-culturally (which makes international comparisons of such networks complicated). Generally, the number of close friends decreases with age (as old friends die or disappear). However, differences among age-groups can also reflect cohort-effects (older generations less oriented towards non-family relationships).

Interestingly, we find that in the last decades in Switzerland the proportion of persons mentioning close friends has significantly increased (Höpflinger 2019). The same trend has been observed in Germany (Böger et al. 2017).

#### Close friends

Question: „Do you have close friends?

%-mentioning at least one close friend

	Persons living at home aged:		Source;
	65-74	75+	
1979 Geneva/Valais	67%	55%	1
1994 Geneva/Valais	82%	70%	2
1999 Switzerland	80%	73%	3
2013 Switzerland	89%	79%	3
2016 Switzerland	91%	81%	3
2019 Switzerland	93%	88%	3
	65-80 J.		
2023 Switzerland	85%		4

1: GUGRISPA 1983, 2: Lalive d’Epinay et al. 2000, 3: Schweiz. Haushaltspanel (own analysis), 4: Samochowiec, Bauer 2023

One factor explaining this trend is an increased life expectancy that results in long-term friends of the same generation to survive longer. Another factor is a trend among younger generations of the elderly to lead a more active social life, particularly cultivating non-family relationships. In any case, self-chosen social relationships (like friends) seem to becoming more important as elements of social integration after retirement. This thesis is supported by the observation that older men and women with close friends are more engaged in clubs or in voluntary work than those without close friends (Höpflinger 2019). The causality goes in two directions: People with friends are also more engaged in other spheres of life, at the same time social engagements after retirement helps to retain or gain friends in old age.

A new trend concerning friendships after retirement is a certain differentiation of two types of friendships: Long-term friends – based on the same generational experiences and values – and new leisure-oriented friends as result of new hobbies or engagements after retirement

(Höpflinger 2019). In some cases – as result of regularly help – neighbours become more important and are re-defined as friends.

## Discussion

The third age in Switzerland is characterized by rapid social changes. New generations of the elderly show higher levels of physical, social and cultural activities. The ‘young old’ of today define themselves more often as healthy and physically active (as well as more innovative and rapidly adapting to digital technologies) than previous generations. They are also socially and culturally more active than earlier generations even considering the fact that active cultural activities (like visiting conferences or courses, playing a musical instrument etc.) are still activities of a selected minority of elderly.

Overall, we find strong indications for a more active life-styles among large groups of the elderly in Switzerland. In two aspects, however, we did not find clear changes (formal further education and formal voluntary work after retirement). This could reflect the fact that a large part of modern activities of the elderly occur outside established structures (informal help, self-organised learning, network of friendships etc.).

Major determinants of the trend towards an active ageing in Switzerland are good health and high economic security after retirement. For these reasons processes of active ageing are primarily observed among healthy and affluent elderly within more prosperous regions of Europe.

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