

# Understanding Well-Being in Poland: Insights from the Global Flourishing Study

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**Abstract:** This study explores well-being in Poland across psychological, social, economic, and spiritual dimensions, situating it within a global context using data from the Global Flourishing Study (GFS). Data from 10,389 individuals representative of the Polish population were analyzed. The study examined multiple well-being indicators including psychological, social, spiritual, and economic outcomes, alongside health, character strengths and prosocial behaviors. Variations in well-being were assessed based on demographic factors, including gender, age, marital status, religiosity, immigration status, and labor market status. Poles report relatively higher psychological well-being, including happiness, life satisfaction, present life evaluation, inner peace, and life balance compared to global metrics of GFS countries. Perceived freedom and optimism are slightly lower. Retirees (aged 60+) exhibit notable psychological resilience, and spiritual flourishing. Social well-being highlights strong social support but low community participation. Psychological distress, including depression and traumatic suffering, is less prevalent than in other GFS countries. However, physical health presents mixed results - self-rated health is comparatively high and physical pain is less common, risky behaviors (smoking, drinking, low exercise frequency) remain concerns. Character strengths and prosocial behavior, such as delayed gratification, gratitude, forgiveness, and volunteering are lower than GFS means. Financial and material security is relatively strong, yet religious engagement is shifting: despite declining institutional participation, 61% of Poles find spiritual comfort, and 28% meditate or pray daily. Poland's well-being landscape reflects both strengths and challenges, with notable demographic differences.

**Keywords:** Poland; psychological, social, spiritual, and economic well-being; health; character strengths and prosocial behaviors; Global Flourishing Study

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of well-being has garnered significant attention across various fields of study, emerging as a critical area of research aimed at understanding the multifaceted nature of human flourishing. Well-being encompasses psychological, social, physical, economic, and spiritual domains, each contributing to the overall quality of life experienced by individuals within different cultural contexts (Diener et al., 1999; Disabato et al., 2016; VanderWeele, 2017a). This paper explores the intricate landscape of well-being in Poland, drawing on the Human Flourishing framework (VanderWeele, 2017a), which includes five domains: life satisfaction and happiness, meaning and purpose in life, health, close social relationships, and character and virtue. It also utilizes data from the Global Flourishing Study

(GFS), which compares psychological, social, physical, economic, and spiritual well-being metrics across 22 countries, including Poland.

### *1.1 Poland: Historical overview*

Poland, a Slavic country with a Roman Catholic identity, bridges the Catholic, Latin West and the Orthodox, Greco-Slavic East. Established in 966, it has a rich history marked by resilience and conflict. For ages the country has been both a battleground and an immediate witness to the strategies of major international players. Notably, for over 200 years Poland formed a transnational political union with Lithuania (1569-1795) in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Davis, 2005). Though Poland was stateless for 123 years after the Third Partition in 1795 which divided the territory among Russia, Prussia, and Austria, reflected in today's cultural, economic and socio-political regional differences, the Polish people remarkably preserved their language, culture, and identity. This resilience occurred despite concerted efforts by Germany and Russia to erase these elements from Polish society (Zamoyski, 2009). Polish history is also deeply marked by the horrors of World War II, when it was invaded by Nazi Germany on September 1, 1939, and by the Soviet Union on September 17, 1939, under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, leading to its occupation and division. Almost six million citizens of the Republic of Poland died during World War II, the vast majority (over 95%) as a result of brutal repression. This number includes three million Jews and Poles of Jewish origin who perished in the Holocaust, which claimed approximately six million Jewish lives across Europe. Poland became the epicenter of Nazi atrocities, housing infamous Nazi death camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibor. Despite occupation, Poles actively resisted through the Polish Underground State and its military wing, the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK), conducting sabotage, intelligence gathering, and major uprisings, including the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 against the Germans. Polish forces also fought alongside the Allies in key battles such as the Battle of Britain, Monte Cassino, and the Normandy invasion. In the East, the Polish II Corps and troops under Soviet command fought against the Nazis. Poles also played a crucial role in intelligence, including breaking the Enigma code, which significantly aided the Allied war effort. Despite these contributions, Poland was abandoned by the West at the Yalta Conference, ultimately falling under Soviet control after the war.

Consequently, Poland was under Soviet control for nearly half a century, yet it was a hotbed for resistance (Friszke, 2024). In the 1980s, Poland became a center of resistance against communist rule, with the rise of Solidarity, led by Lech Wałęsa, whose leadership in the non-military fight for workers' rights and democracy earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983. Another crucial figure was Karol Wojtyła, elected Pope John Paul II in 1978, whose visits to Poland and support for human rights energized the opposition movement. Poland's protests and eventual negotiations set a precedent for reform across Eastern Europe, influencing the fall of communism in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. By 1989, the Round Table Talks and partially free elections in Poland paved the way for democratic transitions across the region, contributing to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the broader fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Poland's historical trajectory has shaped its current socio-economic landscape and social capital. The Communist era left lasting impacts on trust and civic engagement, as collective memories of state surveillance and repression, as well as of the betrayal and collaboration of many Poles who actively supported or benefited from the regime, eroded institutional trust

and led to today's social polarization and divergence in shared values. In response, informal networks, bolstered by the Catholic Church and the Solidarity movement, became vital in navigating daily life. Today, while Poland's post-communist democracy has led to increased civic engagement, institutional trust remains lower compared to Western democracies, and traces of survivalist mindsets (e.g., bending the rules, finding workarounds, or exploiting of legal loopholes) persist. For example, research on adolescents aged 11-12, 13-14 and 17-18 across three groups of countries – (1) post-Soviet republics (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia), (2) former Soviet satellite states that were formally independent but actually controlled by the Soviet Union before 1989 (Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary), and (3) countries outside of Soviet influence (Slovenia, Finland, Portugal, and Greece) – showed that adolescents from the third group exhibited stronger national identity, civic engagement (e.g., willingness to vote, interest in public matters, working for the common good) and loyalty based on institutional trust (e.g., honest work, respect for state officials, adherence to laws and regulations) than their peers from the other two groups (Zalewska & Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2017). Given that young people's declarations and attitudes—particularly political ones—often mirror those of their parents (Okolikj & Hooghe, 2022; Willoughby et al., 2021), these findings suggest that Soviet influences on citizenship persist. However, attitudes and proactive behaviors are evolving, particularly among younger generations and in professional settings, where transparency and adherence to the rule of law are increasingly valued (McMahon & Niparko, 2022; Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2023).

Poland's economic growth, while improving material conditions, has contributed to persistently moderate income inequality, leading to divergent experiences of well-being among its citizens (Szymańska et al., 2024). Recent events have also introduced new factors into Poland's socio-political context, with implications for national identity, social cohesion, and flourishing. For instance, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, an ally and important neighbor to Poland, further complicated this, bringing 2-3 million Ukrainian war refugees into Poland (Duszczuk, 2022) and impacting its citizens' sense of well-being. For instance, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine may have decreased happiness and optimism in Poland, yet the outpouring of support extended by Polish citizens to Ukrainian refugees could have fostered a sense of meaning. To capture this diversity of consequences, a multi-component and multi-dimensional approach to well-being is needed. Fortunately, the diversity and complexity of subjective well-being components have become more recognized in psychological science in recent years (Joshani, 2013, 2014; Kryś et al., 2024). While the literature on well-being explores a variety of components—such as happiness, meaning, harmony, spirituality, and social well-being—the dominant approach for many years has equated subjective well-being with solely happiness and life satisfaction. This prevailing view has increasingly been questioned, with repeated calls for treating well-being in a complex, multidimensional, and culturally sensitive manner (e.g., Joshani et al., 2021; Kryś et al., 2023). This study responds to these calls by examining subjective well-being through the lens of several dozen indicators grouped into five major dimensions: psychological, social, physical, economic, and spiritual. The findings presented in this paper are based on data collected in 2023, reflecting the potential influence of these recent dramatic events on the phenomena analyzed.

### *1.2 Prior evidence on well-being in Poland*

Poland, with its complex historical legacy, has undergone a profound transformation from a post-socialist society to a modern democracy, which has had profound implications for the

well-being of its citizens. Previous research has highlighted the nuanced dynamics of well-being in Poland, revealing both challenges and opportunities. For instance, Zelinska et al. (2021) observed that the shift from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system has significantly impacted subjective well-being of Poles. While economic growth and the steady decrease in income inequality have improved material conditions for many, income inequality remains moderate and higher than in many Western European countries, contributing to social stratification. This affects individuals' perceptions of their well-being, with those experiencing upward mobility often reporting higher satisfaction levels, while others feel disenfranchised (Easterlin, 2001; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

Previous studies comparing well-being across a large number of countries have primarily focused on happiness and life satisfaction. Large international comparisons of other components of subjective well-being are scarce. Rare examples include Oishi and Diener (2014), who compared meaning, and the Global Poll Index by the Gallup World Poll (2025), which collects data on positive and negative affect or life evaluations, among others. This dataset is available for researchers to analyze or publish in sources like the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2024). However, some aspects remain underexplored; for instance, to the best of our knowledge, before the GFS, there were no studies comparing a sense of harmony across a large number of countries. Consequently, currently available studies comparing Poland to other countries tend to focus on happiness-related concepts, presenting a wide range of perspectives on the happiness of Polish citizens. Depending on the research project, Poland is depicted as one of the happiest societies, somewhere in the middle of the rankings, or among the least happy societies. Differences in survey design, question framing (e.g., focus on happiness or unhappiness), and cultural interpretations of happiness might have contributed to the varying depictions of Poland in well-being rankings.

Poland performs relatively well in happiness-related well-being according to recent Eurostat data. In 2022, Poland ranked second in the EU for overall life satisfaction, achieving an average score of 7.7 out of 10, which was higher than the EU average of 7.1. This placed Poland alongside Finland and Romania, with only Austria scoring higher (England, 2024). Regarding happiness, around 75% of Poles reported feeling happy most of the time in the previous month, a percentage similar to Austria and Finland but significantly higher than Bulgaria and Latvia, where only about 35% of respondents reported similar levels of happiness (Eurostat, 2024). However, in the 2000s, Kuppens et al. (2008), using data collected from college students and convenience samples, and Minkov (2009), using the World Value Survey, portrayed Poland as being close to the average in their happiness studies: 21 out of 46 and 64 out of 97 nations worldwide, respectively. Additionally, both an older study by Diener et al. (1995) and more recent research by Krys et al. (2023) have placed Poland among the least happy societies. However, 'least happy' does not equate to 'unhappy'. For instance, in Krys et al.'s study (2023), Poland's average happiness score is slightly below moderate happiness but still well above low happiness (which, in turn, is above unhappiness). Thus, while Poland is classified as one of the less happy societies, it is still, overall, a happy one – just less so than most others. Similar evidence is presented by Brzezinski (2018), who highlights the existence of a “happiness gap”, between Eastern and Western Europe.

Although this gap has narrowed, with a 56% reduction in Poland's unhappiness rate between 1994 and 2014, disparities persist.

When it comes to measures beyond happiness, Poland, like other Eastern European countries, tends to score lower on subjective well-being conceptualized as an aggregate measure of life satisfaction, positive, and negative affect [as available in the European Union Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC)] than nations in Northern and Western Europe (Panek & Zwierzchowski, 2023). Poland is also characterized by relatively low levels of social solidarity, often linked to a weak civic tradition and low social capital, particularly trust (Czapinski, 2006; Kurowska & Theiss, 2018), most likely due to its long history of resisting repression imposed by occupiers. Acts of solidarity are relatively rare. However, among them, donating money or volunteering to support others' rights are the most frequently declared forms of engagement among Poles (Kurowska & Theiss, 2018). Poles are also known for their cultural inclination toward negativity (Wojciszke, 2014), expressed as a norm of negativity regarding one's own emotional states, a norm of negativity toward the social world, and (3) behavioral scripts of complaining. This 'culture of complaining,' as Wojciszke (2014) describes it, is usually associated with lowered mood, increased negative emotions, decreased life satisfaction and optimism, and a belief in the social world's unfairness.

In this context, it seems intriguing that the studies on the conditions and quality of life of Poles conducted from 1991 to 2015 (Czapiński & Panek, 2015) with nationally representative panel samples showed a systematic decrease in depression symptoms and unhappiness, as well as, a systematic increase in the sense of happiness, optimism, satisfaction with the last year, and satisfaction with life overall (above 81% of Poles were satisfied with their life in 2015). These findings align with the EU-SILC data, according to which in 2013 Poland achieved an average of 7.2 (out of 10) for overall life satisfaction compared to the EU-28 average of 7.0 (Eurostat, 2025). Moreover, the increase in the subjective well-being of Poles was visible even during the global financial crisis (2008-2009), when the GDP per capita in Poland was very low. In 2009, Poland ranked 23 out of 27 EU countries - only Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and Bulgaria had lower GDP than Poland (Eurostat, 2010). However, Poland was the only EU country with a positive GDP per capita growth rate at the time, earning the nickname "green island" in Europe. During this period, adolescents (11-14-17 years) from Poland reported a higher level of optimism than their peers from the UK, Spain, and Turkey (Zalewska & Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2010). These data suggest that changes in well-being in Poland did not result solely from economic growth or improved financial situations but also from the expectations aroused by the political transformation regarding favorable changes in socio-political (freedom, democracy) and socio-economic (free market) life.

The diversity in how well-being studies portray Poland can be interpreted in various ways – from signaling differences in research scopes and methods and the need for more careful interpretation, to acknowledging that different perspectives can significantly alter the depiction of well-being in the country. It may also reflect the possibility that the major changes Polish society is currently undergoing could lead to significant fluctuations in well-being. For instance, while Poland's impressive economic growth over the past thirty years may have improved the well-being of its citizens, the socio-political changes (i.e., social protests in 2018 in defense of the courts and against constitutional violations, women's protests in defense of full human rights and the rule of law in 2022, and increasing polarization of political attitudes), the COVID-19 pandemic with its associated challenges to mental health and overall

quality of life (Heitzman, 2020; Pyżalski, 2021), and the terror and fear Polish people, including young adults, experienced during Russia's invasion of Ukraine had an immediate and strong negative impact on their sense of well-being, especially from 2022 onwards (Kałwak et al., 2024; Kaniasty et al., 2023; Scharbert et al., 2024). However, this was also a period in which Poles provided enormous assistance to Ukrainian immigrants (Duszczuk, 2022). The differing findings from previous research – regardless of the explanation – underscore the need for further investigating well-being in Poland and integrating and explaining these discrepancies, ideally through rigorous methods that go beyond the typical approach of equating subjective well-being solely with happiness. This paper seeks to address this need.

## 2. Methods

The description of the methods below has been adapted from VanderWeele et al. (2025). Further methodological detail is available elsewhere, including: an overview of the GFS as a whole (Johnson et al., 2024) and its general methodology (Ritter et al., 2024); an initial questionnaire development report (Crabtree et al., 2021), as well as an updated account of the questionnaire development process (Lomas et al., 2025), of which one aspect was a process piloting the items through cognitive interviewing (Cowden et al., 2024); the GFS Wave 1 codebook (Markham et al., 2024); the survey sampling design for Wave 1 (Padgett, Cowden, et al., 2025); the statistical analyses code (Padgett et al., 2024); and the analytic methodology for demographic variation analyses for Wave 1 (Padgett, Bradshaw, et al., 2025).

The current paper, which focuses specifically on Poland, was pre-registered as part of a coordinated set of studies focusing on country-specific variation in flourishing. These coordinated analyses were preregistered via the Center for Open Science on October 15th, 2024 (Lomas et al., 2024).

### 2.1 Data

This study uses Wave 1 data from the Global Flourishing Study (GFS) collected from 10,389 individuals residing in Poland. The analyzed Polish sample is representative of the Polish population. The sample design includes both a probability sample using computer-assisted personal interviewing and a non-probability sample sourced from the Wave Panel recontact process. Data were collected between December 2022 and October 2023. The response rates were 76.7% for the probability sample and 60.5% for the non-probability sample (Ritter et al., 2024). The GFS is a study involving – in its first wave – 202,898 participants from 22 geographically and culturally diverse countries, with nationally representative sampling within each country, concerning the distribution of determinants of wellbeing. Wave 1 included the following countries and territories: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Egypt, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania, Turkey, UK, and US. The countries were selected to (a) maximize coverage of the world's population, (b) ensure geographic, cultural, and religious diversity, and (c) prioritize feasibility and existing data collection infrastructure. Data collection was carried out by Gallup. Data for Wave 1 were collected principally during 2023, with some countries beginning data collection in 2022, and exact dates varying by country (Ritter et al., 2024). Four additional waves of panel data on the participants will be collected annually from 2024-2027. The precise sampling design to ensure

nationally representative samples varied by country and further details are available (Ritter et al., 2024). Survey items included aspects of flourishing such as, besides subjective well-being, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial stability (VanderWeele, 2017a), plus other demographic, social, economic, political, religious, personality, childhood, community, and health. These data are publicly available through the Center for Open Science (<https://www.cos.io/gfs>). During the translation process, Gallup adhered to the TRAPD model (translation, review, adjudication, pretesting, and documentation) for cross-cultural survey research; for additional details, see the questionnaire development process report (Lomas et al., 2025) and reports on item development and their cognitive testing process (Cowden et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2023).

## 2.2 Measures

### 2.2.1 Outcome variables

In this report we focus on psychological (12 positive and three negative outcomes), social (seven positive and two negative outcomes), economic (three outcomes), and spiritual (13 outcomes) well-being as well as health and health behaviors (six outcomes). We also describe character strengths and prosocial behaviors (nine outcomes). In total 55 outcomes are presented, and 12 additional are included in the Supplementary Material. Of these 67 in total, 57 currently have an associated preregistration as they have been used as part of a global analyses across all 22 GFS countries, and some of which already have been published as peer reviewed papers (as indicated by the citations presented in the Supplementary Material). Table S1 provides details on how each outcome was coded and/or dichotomized for analysis.

### 2.2.2 Variables for demographic variation analyses

There are eight demographic variables: age; gender; marital status; employment; education; religious tradition/affiliation, race/ethnicity; and immigration status. Additionally, the variable 'religious service attendance' was used to further characterize the group. Continuous age was classified as 18-24, 25-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and 80 or older. Gender was assessed as male, female, or other. Marital status was assessed as single/never married, married, separated, divorced, widowed, and domestic partner. Employment was assessed as employed, self-employed, retired, student, homemaker, unemployed and searching, and other. Education was assessed as up to 8 years, 9-15 years, and 16+ years. Religious service attendance was assessed as more than once/week, once/week, one-to-three times/month, a few times/year, or never. Religious tradition/affiliation with categories of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism, Baha'I, Jainism, Shinto, Taoism, Confucianism, Primal/Animist/Folk religion, Spiritism, African-Derived, some other religion, or no religion/atheist/agnostic; precise response categories varied by country (Johnson et al., 2023). Racial/ethnic identity was assessed in some, but not all, countries, with response categories varying by country. Immigration status was dichotomously assessed with: "Were you born in this country, or not?" For additional details on the assessments see Crabtree et al. (2021); Markham et al. (2024).

## 2.3 Analyses

### 2.3.1 Statistical models

Analyses were aligned with those conducted globally on each outcome (see linked pre-registrations in the Supplementary Material). The statistical methods for these demographic variation analyses consist of: (1) describing the weighted sample characteristics; (2) overall mean/proportion on each outcome; and (3) subgroup means across demographic characteristics for each outcome. All reported outcome means and proportions are accompanied by complex survey adjusted standard errors and 95% confidence interval. A global p-value from a significance test of differences in means or proportions across demographic categories is provided; and the reported p-values are Wald-type tests for complex surveys (Lumley & Scott, 2014; Rao & Scott, 1984). The full set of results for all outcomes described previously is reported in the Supplementary Material with focal results presented in text.

### 2.3.2 Inference criteria

We present exact p-values and 95% confidence intervals. P-values correspond to 2-tailed tests for each of our analyses. In our tables, and for ease of reviewing results, we present multiple p-value cutoffs (both with and without Bonferroni correction for multiple testing) because different investigators often use different threshold standards for interpreting evidence based on current norms in their specific discipline. Our Bonferroni correction is  $0.05/68 \text{ outcomes} = p < 0.0007$ .

### 2.3.3 Missing data and multiple imputation

The proportion of missing data was relatively low for most variables (typically below 2%). Nevertheless, all missing variables are imputed using multivariate imputation by chained equations, with five imputed datasets generated (Sterne et al., 2009; van Buuren, 2023). The imputation model incorporated the criterion/outcome variable, all demographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity and religious affiliation when available, and sampling weights. The sampling weights were included as a variable in the imputation models to allow for specific variable missingness to be related to probability of study inclusion. To account for variations in the assessment of certain variables across countries (e.g., race/ethnicity and religious affiliation), the imputation process was conducted separately for each country. The within-country imputation approach ensured that the imputation model accurately reflects country-specific contexts and assessment methods.

### 2.3.4 Accounting for complex sampling design

The GFS used different sampling schemes across countries based on availability of existing panels and recruitment needs (Ritter et al., 2024). All analyses accounted for the complex survey design components by including weights, primary sampling units, and strata. Additional methodological detail, including accounting for the complex sampling design is provided elsewhere (Padgett, Cowden, et al., 2025).

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Description of the Polish sample

The study sample included 10,389 individuals representative of Poland's population (Table 1). The age distribution was diverse, with the largest group being 30-39 years old (21%) and the smallest aged 80 or older (1.4%). Gender representation was nearly equal, with 48% male

and 52% female. Regarding marital status, 58% were married, 17% were single, and 10% were widowed, separated, or divorced. Regarding employment status, 56% were employed for an employer, 6.6% were self-employed, 23% were retired, and smaller proportions were students (5%) or homemakers (3.3%). Religious participation varied, with 35% attending services at least weekly, while 15% never attended. Educational attainment showed that 29% had 16+ years of education, 59% between 9-15 years, and 12% up to 8 years. Most participants (99%) were native-born, 90% identified as Christian, and 9.1% declared as atheist, agnostic, or not identifying with any religion. Polish ethnicity dominated at 99%, with minor representation from groups like Ukrainians (0.4%).

**Table 1. Nationally representative descriptive statistics for Poland**

Characteristic	N = 10,389 <sup>1</sup>
<b>Age group</b>	
18-24	955 (9.2%)
25-29	761 (7.3%)
30-39	2,159 (21%)
40-49	1,956 (19%)
50-59	1,670 (16%)
60-69	1,909 (18%)
70-79	833 (8.0%)
80 or older	145 (1.4%)
(Missing)	1 (<0.1%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	4,974 (48%)
Female	5,387 (52%)
Other	3 (<0.1%)
(Missing)	26 (0.2%)
<b>Marital status</b>	
Married	6,065 (58%)
Separated	111 (1.1%)
Divorced	529 (5.1%)
Widowed	990 (9.5%)
Single, never married	1,811 (17%)
Domestic Partner	504 (4.8%)
(Missing)	379 (3.6%)
<b>Employment</b>	
Employed for an employer	5,837 (56%)
Self-employed	686 (6.6%)
Retired	2,434 (23%)
Student	515 (5.0%)
Homemaker	338 (3.3%)
Unemployed and looking for a job	284 (2.7%)
None of these/Other	169 (1.6%)
(Missing)	126 (1.2%)

Characteristic	N = 10,389 <sup>1</sup>
<b>Religious service attendance</b>	
More than 1/week	305 (2.9%)
1/week	3,263 (31%)
1-3/month	2,081 (20%)
A few times a year	3,064 (29%)
Never	1,597 (15%)
(Missing)	78 (0.8%)
<b>Education</b>	
Up to 8 years	1,238 (12%)
9-15 years	6,130 (59%)
16+ years	3,020 (29%)
(Missing)	1 (<0.1%)
<b>Immigration</b>	
Born in this country	10,258 (99%)
Born in another country	108 (1.0%)
(Missing)	23 (0.2%)
<b>Religious affiliation</b>	
Christianity	9,378 (90%)
Islam	2 (<0.1%)
Hinduism	0 (0%)
Buddhism	2 (<0.1%)
Judaism	0 (0%)
Sikhism	1 (<0.1%)
Baha'i	0 (0%)
Jainism	3 (<0.1%)
Shinto	1 (<0.1%)
Taoism	0 (0%)
Confucianism	0 (0%)
Primal, Animist, or Folk religion	11 (0.1%)
Spiritism	0 (0%)
Umbanda, Candomblé, and other African-derived religions	0 (0%)
Chinese folk/traditional religion	0 (0%)
Some other religion	0 (0%)
No religion/Atheist/Agnostic	942 (9.1%)
(Missing)	50 (0.5%)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Belarussian	2 (<0.1%)
German	4 (<0.1%)
Kashubians	3 (<0.1%)
Other	4 (<0.1%)
Polish	10,309 (99%)
Silesia	14 (0.1%)
Ukrainian	38 (0.4%)
(Missing)	14 (0.1%)

<sup>1</sup>n (%)

### 3.2 Well-being in Poland

Poles reported relatively high psychological well-being, with higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, peace, life balance, and present life evaluation compared to the meta-analytic mean of the 22 GFS countries (Table 2). Their scores for mastery, meaning and purpose in life tended to be slightly higher, but were close to the GFS means. However, the Polish scores for freedom and optimism tended to be slightly lower than the GFS averages. They also experienced lower levels of psychological distress, including traumatic distress, depression, anxiety, and suffering.

Social well-being in Poland was characterized by strong social support and social connectedness, as well as high satisfaction with the place of living. While trust and sense of belonging aligned more closely with GFS averages, community participation remained low. Additionally, Poles reported less discrimination and loneliness than the global GFS mean.

However, engagement in prosocial behaviors such as volunteering, charitable giving, and helping strangers was notably lower than in other GFS countries, similarly to the scores in the domain of character strengths, in which Poles scored lower on delayed gratification, gratitude, and forgiveness. The Polish scores for promoting Good, hope, and love were similar to the GFS means.

Physical health and health behaviors presented a mixed picture. Poles rated their physical health above the GFS mean, reported less pain, and fewer health limitations. However, certain risky health behaviors, such as infrequent exercise and smoking, remain concerns.

Poland outperformed the GFS averages in financial and material security, with 79% of Poles being able to make ends meet on their current income, significantly higher than the GFS rate of 64%.

In terms of religion and spirituality, while 90% of Poles identified as Christians, their engagement in religious practices – such as community involvement, evangelism, profound religious experience, prayer or meditation, or reading sacred texts – was lower than the GFS means. However, many (61%) still found personal spiritual comfort and strength, indicating a shift toward more individualized rather than institutional religious engagement.

### 3.3 Age differences in well-being in Poland

Examining psychological well-being and distress across age groups revealed distinct patterns (Table S3 in the Supplementary Material). A general decline with age was observed for happiness, life satisfaction, life evaluation in five years, optimism, and self-rated mental health. However, notable peaks in happiness, life satisfaction, and optimism were evident among individuals aged 60-69, compared to both pre-retirement individuals (50-59) and those aged 70+. Interestingly, life evaluation in five years increased among the oldest adults (80+) compared to those aged 70-79. A U-shaped association emerged for freedom, peace (inner harmony), and mastery, with the lowest scores reported at midlife (40-49), followed by a further decline among the oldest adults (70+). In contrast, life evaluation today, life balance, and life meaning remained relatively stable across age groups. However, a sense of purpose in life increased with age and peaked among those aged 60+, defying expectations of a consistent decline across age cohorts.

**Table 2. Estimated means and proportions across outcome variables for Poland**

Outcome (range <sup>a</sup> )	Poland				All 22 GFS countries		
	Mean	SE	95% CI	SD	Meta-analytic Mean	SE	95% CI
<b>Thematic Area 1: Multidimensional Well-being</b>							
<i>Psychological Well-being</i>							
Happiness (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.55	0.047	(7.46, 7.65)	1.60	7.00	0.12	(6.76,7.25)
Life Satisfaction (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.52	0.050	(7.42, 7.62)	1.73	6.85	0.16	(6.54,7.16)
Life Evaluation Today (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.12	0.042	(7.04, 7.20)	1.62	6.34	0.17	(6.01,6.67)
Life Evaluation Five Years from Now (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.39	0.048	(7.30, 7.49)	1.78	7.49	0.14	(7.21,7.77)
Optimism (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.72	0.054	(7.61, 7.83)	1.83	8.11	0.16	(7.79,8.43)
Freedom (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.60	0.059	(7.49, 7.72)	1.87	7.80	0.13	(7.55,8.06)
Peace (% of always/often)	0.78	0.011	(0.76, 0.81)	-	0.71	0.02	(0.67,0.76)
Balance in Life (% of always/often)	0.78	0.011	(0.76, 0.80)	-	0.69	0.02	(0.64,0.74)
Mastery (% of always/often)	0.84	0.012	(0.82, 0.86)	-	0.79	0.03	(0.74,0.84)
Meaning (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.71	0.055	(7.60, 7.82)	1.76	7.39	0.14	(7.12,7.66)
Purpose (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.77	0.070	(7.64, 7.91)	1.99	7.65	0.17	(7.32,7.98)
Self-Rated Mental Health (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	8.07	0.056	(7.96, 8.18)	1.81	7.71	0.17	(7.36,8.05)
<i>Social Well-being</i>							
Subjective Social Connectedness (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.65	0.052	(7.55, 7.75)	1.75	7.55	0.12	(7.30,7.79)
Social Support (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	8.00	0.057	(7.89, 8.12)	1.85	7.40	0.19	(7.02,7.78)
Intimate Friend (% of having a close friend)	0.87	0.009	(0.85, 0.88)	-	0.83	0.01	(0.81,0.86)
Belonging (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.72	0.071	(7.59, 7.86)	2.17	7.74	0.15	(7.45,8.03)
Place Satisfaction (% of satisfied with the area of living)	0.93	0.005	(0.92, 0.94)	-	0.82	0.02	(0.79,0.86)
Trust (% of trusting all/most/some people)	0.23	0.012	(0.20, 0.25)	-	0.25	0.03	(0.20,0.30)
Community Participation (% of participating at least once/week)	0.10	0.008	(0.08, 0.12)	-	0.20	0.01	(0.17,0.23)
<i>Psychological Distress</i>							
Traumatic Distress (% of being bothered a lot/some in the last month)	0.16	0.009	(0.14, 0.18)	-	0.36	0.02	(0.32,0.41)

Outcome (range <sup>a</sup> )	Poland				All 22 GFS countries		
	Mean	SE	95% CI	SD	Meta-analytic Mean	SE	95% CI
Depression (% of nearly every day/more than half the days)	0.14	0.009	(0.12, 0.16)	-	0.32	0.02	(0.27,0.37)
Anxiety (% of nearly every day/more than half the days)	0.13	0.009	(0.11, 0.14)	-	0.30	0.02	(0.25,0.34)
Suffering (% of feeling a lot/some)	0.25	0.010	(0.22, 0.27)	-	0.44	0.02	(0.40,0.49)
<i>Social Distress</i>							
Loneliness (0-10; the higher, the less lonely)	7.56	0.062	(7.44, 7.68)	2.25	6.62	0.11	(6.40,6.84)
Discrimination (% of feeling always/often)	0.13	0.008	(0.11, 0.15)	-	0.24	0.02	(0.20,0.27)
<i>Character &amp; Prosocial Behaviors</i>							
Promoting Good (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.92	0.053	(7.81, 8.02)	1.64	8.01	0.12	(7.77,8.25)
Delayed Gratification (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	6.80	0.078	(6.65, 6.95)	2.31	7.45	0.16	(7.14,7.75)
Hope (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.94	0.057	(7.83, 8.05)	1.78	8.13	0.16	(7.81,8.45)
Gratitude (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.35	0.052	(7.25, 7.45)	1.82	7.84	0.15	(7.54,8.14)
Love (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.80	0.061	(7.68, 7.92)	1.98	8.19	0.15	(7.90,8.49)
Forgiveness (% of always/often)	0.65	0.014	(0.62, 0.68)	-	0.75	0.02	(0.70,0.80)
Charitable Giving (% of yes)	0.20	0.010	(0.19, 0.22)	-	0.38	0.04	(0.31,0.45)
Helping (% of yes)	0.26	0.012	(0.24, 0.28)	-	0.56	0.03	(0.49,0.63)
Volunteering (% of yes)	0.08	0.006	(0.07, 0.10)	-	0.24	0.03	(0.19,0.29)
<i>Physical Health &amp; Health Behaviors</i>							
Self-Rated Physical Health (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.68	0.055	(7.57, 7.79)	1.90	7.21	0.14	(6.93,7.49)
Health Limitations (% of yes)	0.13	0.008	(0.12, 0.15)	-	0.21	0.01	(0.18,0.24)
Pain (% of a lot/some)	0.32	0.011	(0.30, 0.35)	-	0.44	0.02	(0.40,0.48)
Smoking (number of cigarettes per day)	3.64	0.126	(3.40, 3.89)	6.59	2.36	0.42	(1.54,3.17)
Drinking (number of drinks per week)	1.99	0.081	(1.83, 2.15)	3.23	1.78	0.28	(1.23,2.33)
Exercise (number of days per week)	1.39	0.047	(1.30, 1.49)	1.87	2.45	0.15	(2.16,2.74)
<i>Economic Outcomes</i>							
Financial Security (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	6.98	0.070	(6.84, 7.12)	2.37	5.59	0.22	(5.16,6.02)
Material Security (0-10; the higher, the more positive assessment)	7.33	0.073	(7.18, 7.47)	2.38	5.89	0.25	(5.41,6.38)

Outcome (range <sup>a</sup> )	Poland				All 22 GFS countries		
	Mean	SE	95% CI	SD	Meta-analytic Mean	SE	95% CI
Subjective Financial Wellbeing (% of living comfortably on present income/getting by on present income)	0.79	0.011	(0.77, 0.81)	-	0.64	0.04	(0.56,0.71)
<b>Thematic Area 2: Religion/Spirituality</b>							
Self-Reported Religion/Spirituality (% of feeling connected to a religion or a form of spirituality always/often)	0.56	0.012	(0.53, 0.58)	-	0.61	0.04	(0.53,0.70)
Religious Service Attendance (% of at least once/week)	0.35	0.013	(0.32, 0.37)	-	0.37	0.05	(0.27,0.48)
Life after Death Belief (% of yes)	0.57	0.014	(0.55, 0.60)	-	0.54	0.04	(0.47,0.60)
Religious Experience (% of life-changing a profound religious or spiritual awakening or experience)	0.08	0.006	(0.07, 0.10)	-	0.39	0.04	(0.31,0.47)
Religious Reading (% of more than once a day/about once a day)	0.08	0.006	(0.07, 0.09)	-	0.30	0.04	(0.22,0.39)
Prayer-Meditation (% of more than once a day/about once a day)	0.28	0.013	(0.26, 0.31)	-	0.50	0.06	(0.38,0.61)
Belief in God or an Impersonal Spiritual Force (% of yes)	0.83	0.009	(0.81, 0.84)	-	0.78	0.05	(0.69,0.87)
Intrinsic Religiosity (% of yes)	0.57	0.014	(0.54, 0.60)	-	0.67	0.05	(0.56,0.78)
Finding Strength in Religious/Spiritual Comfort (% of yes)	0.61	0.011	(0.59, 0.63)	-	0.72	0.05	(0.62,0.82)
Feeling Loved by God or Spiritual Force (% of yes)	0.64	0.011	(0.62, 0.66)	-	0.73	0.05	(0.62,0.84)
Feeling Punished by God or Spiritual Force (% of yes)	0.25	0.013	(0.23, 0.28)	-	0.32	0.05	(0.23,0.41)
Religious Community Being Critical to One's Lifestyle (% of yes)	0.21	0.011	(0.19, 0.23)	-	0.33	0.04	(0.25,0.41)
Evangelism – Telling People about One's Religion or Spirituality (% of yes)	0.43	0.014	(0.40, 0.46)	-	0.58	0.05	(0.49,0.67)

Note. <sup>a</sup>exact response scales are presented in Table S1 in the Supplementary Material

In the domains of social well-being and social distress, the youngest adults (18-24) reported the lowest levels of belonging, satisfaction with their place of living, perceived influence over national government decisions, and approval of its actions. At the same time, they also reported the highest levels of subjective social connectedness, social support, and general trust along with lowest levels of loneliness. Older adults aged 60-79 experienced lower loneliness than middle-aged adults (40-59) and reported a stronger sense of belonging (which increased consistently across age groups), and greater satisfaction with their place of residence. A U-shaped relationship was observed for social support and community participation, both of which declined among middle-aged adults (40-59). This pattern was similarly evident for subjective social connectedness and trust, although for these two outcomes declines were also observed among the oldest adults (80+). No pronounced age cohort effects were observed for feelings of discrimination.

Age was not associated with helping strangers and volunteering (donating time), but a clear age cohort pattern emerged in charitable giving (donating money): the oldest Poles (70+) most frequently reported donating money, while the youngest Poles did so least often. A similar pattern was observed for several character-related outcomes, including promoting good, delayed gratification, gratitude, forgiveness, and—though to a lesser extent—love. These scores tended to be lowest among the youngest group (18-29) and highest among those aged 60-79. Additionally, for delayed gratification, the highest scores were observed among Poles aged 40-59 and 70-79, while the lowest are found among the oldest group (80+). The oldest Poles (80+) also scored the lowest in hope, gratitude (along with the youngest group), and love. Interestingly, hope was the only outcome in which the youngest Poles (18-29) scored the highest, followed by the second oldest (70-79). The lowest scores in hope were observed among pre-retirement Poles (50-59), with an additional decline noted among the oldest group (80+).

No strong age relations were observed for depression and anxiety. However, the prevalence of suffering and experiences of life-threatening events causing traumatic distress increased with age, peaking among the oldest groups. Physical health also exhibited a clear pattern of worsening with age: self-rated health deteriorates, and the prevalence of pain and health limitations increased, while the frequency of physical exercise declined. Risky behaviors showed an inverted U-shaped pattern with age, with peaks at ages 50-59 for smoking and 30-39 for drinking.

Regarding financial situations, a U-shaped pattern was observed for material safety, with individuals aged 30-39 feeling the least safe, alongside a pronounced decline among individuals aged 80+ (a deviation from the pattern). Financial safety and subjective financial well-being were highest among the youngest adults (18-24) for the former and among those aged 18-59 for the latter. By contrast, the oldest adults consistently scored the worst, followed by those aged 50-69 and 60-69, respectively.

As regards religion and spiritual well-being, a positive, nearly linear association with age was evident across all dimensions, except for religious criticism, which shows no age group effect. Younger individuals consistently scored substantially lower than older individuals in these domains.

### *3.4 Gender differences in well-being in Poland*

Gender differences also emerged for selected well-being outcomes, with women scoring higher on character strengths like gratitude, love, forgiveness, and as well as greater engagement in prosocial behaviors like volunteering and an orientation to promote good (but with no gender differences in charitable giving and helping strangers, compared to men (Table S4 in the Supplementary Material). Women also demonstrated stronger religious and spiritual

involvement (in 11 out of 13 indicators), including higher levels of prayer, religious service attendance, and belief in God. In contrast, men reported higher levels of health-disrupting behaviors like smoking and drinking, while simultaneously exercising more often than women and reporting slightly higher self-rated physical health. Women reported more pain, suffering, and health limitations. They also reported lower financial well-being, feeling less financially and materially secure. No gender differences were observed for psychological well-being outcomes and social well-being (with exception of satisfaction with the place of living for which women scored higher).

#### 4. Discussion

This study examined multiple well-being indicators in Poland, including psychological, social, economic, health, and spiritual outcomes, as well as character strengths and prosocial behaviors, using data from the GFS. While comparing these indicators to the GFS means and analyzing demographic variations, our findings offer a nuanced portrait of well-being in Poland – one that reflects both strengths and challenges.

##### 4.1 Poles' well-being in a Global GFS Context

Compared to other GFS countries, Poland demonstrates relatively higher psychological well-being, with Poles reporting comparatively higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and present life evaluation. Scores for inner peace and balance in life also surpass GFS means, though sense of freedom and optimism are slightly lower. These findings align with recent research indicating that happiness in Poland have remained relatively high (Eurostat, 2025) and may have increased over the last few decades. Notably, maintaining such happiness levels in 2023 suggests resilience in the face of socio-political challenges and the profound psychological impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which occurred shortly before the GFS data collection (Kaniasty et al., 2023; Scharbert et al., 2024). However, the slightly lower scores on optimism and sense of freedom may reflect the lingering impact of these external stressors on the psychological well-being of Poles.

Social well-being indicators present a complex pattern. While Poles do not differ in levels of trust, belonging, and social connectedness from the GFS means, along with relatively lower experiences of discrimination and loneliness, they also express higher satisfaction with their place of living and stronger social support. However, community participation is comparatively lower.

Character strengths and prosocial behaviors show a similar mixed picture. While levels of love, hope, and promoting good align with the GFS means, Poles score lower on delayed gratification, gratitude, forgiveness, and engagement in prosocial activities such as volunteering, helping strangers, and charitable giving. These findings suggest that fostering social participation, character strengths, and strengthening prosocial behaviors may be key areas for enhancing well-being in Poland.

Psychological distress appears less prevalent than in other GFS countries, with lower reported levels of depression, suffering, and traumatic distress. However, physical health metrics are mixed. While Poles report better self-rated health and lower prevalence of pain and physical limitations compared to the GFS means, exercise frequency and certain risky health behaviors remain areas of concern.

While financial security and material safety in Poland are consistently higher than GFS means, engagement in religious practices and spiritual activities is lower, except for religious service attendance which is comparable, despite 89% of Poles identifying as Christians (CBOS,

2024). These findings align with previous research on religiosity in Poland, which reports that around 92% of adult Poles believe in God and 36% attended religious service weekly (CBOS, 2024), compared to 84% and 35%, respectively, in our study. Importantly, our analysis provides a more detailed perspective on spiritual engagement beyond institutional practices. Of particular attention is the fact that 61% of adult Poles declare finding strength and comfort in their religion or spirituality, 64% feel loved by God or a spiritual force and 28% declares meditating or praying at least once a day. These findings suggest that spiritual/religious aspect of life may be important for a great number of Poles, though not necessarily through traditional institutionalized practices in churches – supporting an existing hypothesis about shifting religious engagement patterns in Poland (Marianński, 2024).

Overall, these results highlight Poland's distinct well-being profile within the GFS dataset. This aligns with other comparative GFS research, which suggests that Poland ranks relatively favorably in terms of lower levels of traumatic distress, depression, anxiety (including difficulty controlling worry), suffering, and health limitations (VanderWeele et al., 2025). At the same time, areas with greater potential for growth include pro-social behaviors, such as helping, volunteering, as well as selected character strengths, including love and delayed gratification (VanderWeele et al., 2025). Considerable differences by age and gender further refine this picture, underscoring the importance of demographic variation in shaping well-being outcomes.

#### 4.2 Well-being age differences

The GFS provided an opportunity to examine various components of flourishing and well-being across age, exploring how people flourish at different stages of life. Several patterns of age-related relationships were revealed in the Polish sample. For psychological well-being (affective, cognitive, and eudaimonic dimensions), the dominant patterns were either near linear or U-shaped associations across age groups. These patterns with high scoring the youngest and the oldest Poles were also characterized by an increase in scores during the “golden years” (60-69 years) and a subsequent decline in older groups, possibly due to factors such as declining health and the loss of partners and friends. This type of association, thought present in many countries (Blanchflower, 2021), is not universal, as recent studies have shown (Bartram, 2023, 2024). Nevertheless, prevailing, mostly cross-sectional, evidence suggests that indicators of subjective well-being – such as life satisfaction and happiness – generally exhibit U-shaped patterns, with their lowest points occurring during various middle life stages (Blanchflower, 2021). For example, in the United States, global well-being, enjoyment, and happiness also followed U-shaped patterns, with their lowest levels occurring in the 50s (Stone et al., 2010), while in our study the lowest levels of happiness and life satisfaction were associated with the pre-retirement period (ages 50-59 – preparing for transgression and re-evaluation of life's purpose) and also observed among Polish oldest adults aged 70+. In this study, a decline in scores among those aged 70+ was evident for happiness, life satisfaction, present and future life evaluations, optimism, as well as meaning, and for those aged 80+ also for freedom, balance and purpose. Interestingly, the age at which this decline begins in the Polish sample (70+ or 80+) is higher than in Germany [around 65 years (Blanchflower & Piper, 2022)] and comparable to Norway (70–75 years), a country with one of the highest levels of psychological well-being (Hansen & Blekesaune, 2022). It is worth noting that while prior longitudinal studies on psychological well-being in Germany (Blanchflower & Piper, 2022) and Norway (Hansen & Blekesaune, 2022) have documented similar U-shaped patterns, previous evidence on Poland, based on cross-sectional data, has yielded mixed results, with Bartram (2023) reporting a U-shaped association and Bartram (2024) suggesting a more steadily declining pattern.

In Poland, the lowest levels of trust and some eudaimonic dimensions (e.g. peace, optimism, mastery, freedom, and meaning) were associated with the midlife period (40-49 years) as well as oldest adulthood. Only two aspects of social well-being—social support and community participation—showed a U-shaped relationship with age cohorts in this study, with the lowest scores observed among middle-aged adults (40–59 years), and the highest noted among the youngest and the older Poles. In contrast, loneliness, belonging, satisfaction with one's place of living, approval of national government performance, and belief that Poles have a say in government's actions were found to gradually increase with age groups, implying that the scores are the lowest among the youngest Poles. These findings highlight a complex interplay between generation and social well-being in Poland. While older adults seem to derive greater satisfaction from their social and living environments, the highest levels of loneliness observed in the 70+ age groups underscore the importance of fostering stronger community ties and social inclusion initiatives for this demographic.

Next, most character strengths (with the exception of hope) and nearly all indicators of spiritual and religious life show positive association with age groups, implying that older Poles score the higher. Simultaneously, Poles report that the self-assessment of mental and physical health declines with age, while the levels of traumatic distress, experience of pain, and suffering increase. A decline was also observed among those aged 80+ (compared to the 60-79 age groups) for certain eudaimonic dimensions, such as inner peace, mastery, freedom, meaning and purpose in life, as well as for two aspects of social well-being (trust and social connectedness). It is worth noting, however, that the sense of purpose is highest among older adults, particularly those aged 60+, while meaning is highest among those age 60-69. These findings send a positive message as meaning and purpose in life are well-known protective factors against many physical and mental health conditions (Boyle et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020; Ryff, 2017; Steptoe & Fancourt, 2020). Therefore, high levels of life purpose and meaning observed among Polish adults aged 60+ may contribute to maintaining high psychological well-being until the age of 70+ (and even 80+), while also possibly enhancing social and spiritual well-being and character strengths. Increased levels of belonging, satisfaction with one's place of living, and spiritual well-being may additionally suggest that older adults may find new ways to flourish despite physical and psychological challenges.

In this context, it is worth noting that while overall well-being, as measured by the Flourishing Index, tends to increase with age in most GFS countries, or follows a U-shape pattern (as seen in India, Egypt, Kenya and Japan), Poland and Tanzania stand out as exceptions, where flourishing generally declines with age (VanderWeele et al., 2025).

#### 4.3 Well-being of young Poles

Prior research indicated that Polish youth and emerging adults (aged 19-25) appeared to focus predominantly on personal activity, striving for happiness and optimal personal functioning more strongly than for socio-political engagement or optimal functioning in social contexts, as indicated by data collected in November 2018-February 2019 (Zalewska, 2023). Additionally, in early 2023, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 72% of young adults in Poland reported feeling stressed or very stressed by this military conflict, 84% reported stressed or very stressed by the economic situation, and 73% reported feeling responsible for the ecological crisis (Kałwak et al., 2024).

Our results complement this picture by showing that the youngest groups appear happier, more satisfied with their lives and evaluating them more positively than older Poles. They also display notably higher flourishing, as measured by the Flourishing Index (VanderWeele, 2017a),

exceeding even those who are employed; a similar pattern observed in countries such as India, Japan, Tanzania, Israel, Egypt, and Kenya (VanderWeele et al., 2025). Young Poles also report higher levels of optimism, hope, freedom, and inner peace compared to older groups. This age group also reports the highest levels of social connectedness and social support, as well as the lowest levels of loneliness. However, a concerning finding is that they report lowest levels of purpose in life as well as sense of belonging, satisfaction with their place of living, the lowest approval of Polish government job performance, and a very limited sense of agency regarding the actions of the Polish government. Additionally, this group is the least inclined to delay gratification or forgive compared to other Poles. Prior studies have shown that purpose in life predicts higher psychological well-being, volunteer activities, and mental health (Chen et al., 2019; Ryff, 2017) and both of these character strengths are important predictors of better mental health, well-being, and life achievements (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Lundahl et al., 2008; Moffitt et al., 2011; Moffitt et al., 2013; Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2023).

On a positive note, in terms of financial well-being, this group scores the highest among all age groups. However, when it comes to religiosity and spirituality, the youngest consistently score the lowest. Despite this, it is noteworthy that 70% of Poles aged 18–24 believe in God, 48% report feeling loved by God, 42% find strength and comfort in their spirituality and/or religion, and 37% believe in life after death. On the other hand, only 12% of this age group pray or meditate, and just 21% attend religious services at least once per week. This nuanced picture suggests a generational shift in the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of young Poles. While traditional practices are on the decline, personal beliefs and a sense of connection to spirituality remain significant for many, pointing to evolving forms of religiosity and meaning making in younger generations.

#### 4.4 Gender differences

In Poland, women's life expectancy is significantly higher than men's. In 2023, the average life expectancy for men was 74.7 years, compared to 82 years for women (GUS, 2024). This study offers a unique opportunity to compare women and men across various components of flourishing and well-being, shedding light on factors that may contribute to women's longer life expectancy or hinder it for men. Polish women experience greater suffering and pain, and report lower economic well-being compared to men. However, men are more likely to engage in harmful health behaviors such as smoking and drinking. The observed gender differences in suffering, economic well-being, and health behaviors in Poland may be influenced by several socio-cultural trends. In Poland, as in many other Central and Eastern European countries, traditional gender roles remain influential, particularly in family structures and societal expectations (Matysiak & Weziak-Białowolska, 2016). Women in Poland are often expected to balance work and household responsibilities, while simultaneously take on the primary caregiving roles in families (Suwada & Karwacki, 2024), which could perhaps contribute to their greater reported suffering and pain; and, as indicated by other studies (Kopycińska & Kryńska, 2016), had profound economic adverse consequences leading to lower economic well-being, as demonstrated by this study. On the other hand, men's greater engagement in harmful health behaviors like smoking and drinking might stem from societal pressures around masculinity and the coping mechanisms associated with it. Alcohol consumption, in particular, is in Poland culturally tied to male socialization, with drinking being an integral part of social gatherings and perceived masculinity (Mullen et al., 2007; Zatońska et al., 2021).

Additionally, women report greater character strengths, including an orientation to promote good, gratitude, love, and forgiveness, as well as greater spiritual well-being across most

dimensions. While previous evidence on these traits among Polish women is limited, it has been shown that these traits can play a protective role, helping women transform negative thoughts and emotions into positive ones (Tomasulo, 2023). Furthermore, plenty of evidence shows greater spirituality and religiosity being linked to healthy aging and longevity (Dominguez et al., 2024; Li et al., 2016; VanderWeele, 2017b; VanderWeele et al., 2016) through mechanisms such as positive coping strategies and religious comfort (Exline et al., 2000; Zarzycka et al., 2019).

#### 4.5 Limitations and strengths

This study has certain limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of data prevents causal interpretations of demographic variations in examined dimensions of well-being. Second, participants may have experienced challenges in understanding and interpreting well-being items in a uniform way across 22 GFS countries. It is unclear how much this influenced responses. Cross-national cognitive interviewing conducted during the survey development process for the GFS revealed that some individuals might face challenges in understanding and interpreting certain items. However, no evidence of such challenges was observed in Poland (Cowden et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2023). Third, it is also important to note that the findings presented are based on data in 2023, a year marked by substantial social protests and increasing polarization of political attitudes in the country. Additionally, the Russian aggression against Ukraine deeply shocked Polish society and may have significantly affected the well-being of its citizens. These contextual factors should be considered when interpreting the results, as they likely influenced various dimensions of well-being. We hope that future waves of the study will reflect a more peaceful situation within the country and along Poland's borders, potentially offering a different perspective on well-being than what is presented in this paper. Fourth, although 22 GFS countries represent approximately half of the world's population, span all continents, and vary in cultural contexts, they do not form a perfectly representative sample of all countries. Therefore, our comparisons are made relative to the GFS means, rather than to the entire global population.

Despite these limitations, the study has several major strengths – its substantial sample size in Poland and in other GFS countries, extensive global coverage, and a holistic approach to well-being that extends beyond hedonic and eudemonic well-being and also embraces more generalized spiritual well-being. Our findings, derived from a large, nationally representative sample, augment existing understanding of the distribution and sociodemographic variations in well-being in Poland. By incorporating in the GFS less commonly studied nations (often overlooked in previous research in this area), this study offers a more comprehensive and comparative mapping of well-being. This approach aids in identifying specific demographics that are more characterized by well-being and ill-being.

## 5. Conclusions

Compared to previous findings on Poles' well-being, the GFS Wave 1 results suggest that Polish citizens are relatively happy, satisfied with their lives, and report a strong sense of inner peace and balance in their lives, alongside the lowest levels of suffering among all the countries studied. However, they also appear less engaged in prosocial behaviors, score lower in character strengths, and exhibit higher rates of smoking, drinking – factors that may contribute to a somewhat pessimistic outlook on the future. Despite these mixed trends, the flourishing profiles across different age groups revealed a striking pattern: Poles of retirement age (60+) demonstrate remarkably high levels of life purpose, belonging, delayed gratification, gratitude, and forgiveness. They also score highest in current life evaluation, trust, and spiritual well-being, and are among the top scoring in social support and social connectedness. At the same time, they

report the lowest hope and the highest suffering and loneliness. This seemingly paradoxical pattern may be rooted in their experience of the post-communist transformation in the 1990s and early 2000s, a period that posed substantial challenges for many. On the one hand, adversity may have fostered resilience and appreciation of achievements, helping this cohort maintain high psychological well-being well into their 70s and 80s, while also enhancing their social and spiritual well-being, as well as character strengths. This interpretation aligns with findings from other countries (e.g., the United States and Argentina), where difficult childhood financial circumstances were linked to higher adult meaning (VanderWeele et al., 2025). Interestingly, in Poland, the opposite pattern emerged: living comfortably was associated with lower adult meaning (VanderWeele et al., 2025). On the other hand, aging naturally brings health decline and the loss of peers, contributing to loneliness and reduced hope. Young Poles, while generally happy, healthy, optimistic, hopeful, trustful and socially connected, appear less politically engaged, report weaker feelings of belonging, and show lower levels of purpose in life, forgiveness and a willingness to delay gratification or adopt a deferred reward mindset.

Gender differences also reveal important dynamics. While Polish women outlive men, they experience greater suffering and pain and report lower economic well-being. However, they engage less in harmful health behaviors such as smoking and drinking and demonstrate stronger character strengths and spiritual well-being – factors that may contribute to healthier aging and longevity.

These findings provide only a partial reflection on Poland's remarkable transformation over the past 35 years. However, they may also suggest significant progress for a hard-working society still striving to strengthen its welfare system, while navigating recent socio-political challenges and the impact of a nearby war. Future waves of the GFS will unveil the next chapters of this unfolding story.

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### **Author contribution statement**

DWB, AMZ, and KK wrote the manuscript with contributions from BC., TL, 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.

### **Conflict of interest**

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

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### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this article are openly available on the Open Science Framework (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/3JTZ8>). The specific dataset used was Wave 1 non-sensitive global data <https://osf.io/sm4cd/> available February 2024 - March 2026 via preregistration and publicly from then onwards. These coordinated analyses were preregistered via the Center for Open Science on October 15th, 2024 (<https://Osf.Io/7ngc5/>)

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