

Extended Abstract

Characteristics of the Future Older U.S. Population

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The baby boom generation has been the dominant force behind the nation's changing age structure. By mid-century, the baby boomers are expected to transform the U.S. population into one containing an unprecedented number of older residents. Along with its increasing size, the older population is becoming more diverse in terms of race and Hispanic origin. Analysis of the sex ratios at the older ages shows a trend toward more of a balance between the number of men and women at older ages in the future.

Recently released projections from the U.S. Census Bureau demonstrate the manner in which these characteristics will change between now and 2050. Using these new Census projections, this analysis examines the overall aging of the U.S. population including the growth of the older population and the impacts this growth has on dependency ratios. We also will look at the changing composition of the older population. These projections are the first Census Bureau projections that use the 1997 Office of Management and Budget's race categories. The use of the new race standards enables us to examine the growing diversity of the older population in the United States.

Aging of the U.S. Population:

The number of residents aged 65 years and older is projected to nearly double between 2010 and 2030, growing from 40.2 million to 72.1 million in 2030. This increase means that nearly 1 in 5 people are expected to be 65 and older by 2030, when all of the baby boom generation will have reached that benchmark. This shift will have a distinct impact on dependency ratios, particularly on the old age dependency ratio. In 2010, the old age dependency ratio is expected to be 21 (e.g., 21 people aged 65 and over per 100 people aged 18 to 64). By 2030, we project this dependency ratio will reach 34, again driven mainly by the aging of the baby boomers.

Diversity within Older Age Groups:

In 2010, 80.2 percent of the 65 and older population will be non-Hispanic White alone, 8.5 percent will be Black alone, and 7.1 percent will be Hispanic. The racial and ethnic make up of this group is projected to change by 2030, when 71.2 percent of the 65 and older population is projected to be non-Hispanic White alone and 10.3 percent are projected to Black alone. The Hispanic proportion of the older population is projected to grow from 7.1 percent in 2010 to 12.0 percent in 2030 to 19.8 percent in 2050. In other words, by 2050, nearly 1 in 5 older people in the United States are projected to be of Hispanic origin.

Sex Ratios at Older Ages:

Historically, women have made up the majority of the older population in United States and other countries around the world. This is due to the differential in life expectancy between men and women. Women have higher life expectancies than men; therefore women tend to dominate the older ages, particularly the oldest ages (aged 85 and over).

In 2010, the projected sex ratio for the population 65 and over is 75, indicating 75 men aged 65 and over for every 100 women in this age group. This sex ratio is projected to increase over the course of the next several decades growing to 82 men per every 100 women by 2050.

We see a similar increase in the sex ratio for the oldest old. In 2010, 49 men aged 85 and over are projected per 100 women in the same age category. By 2050, the sex ratio for those aged 85 and over is projected to increase to 64. This changing composition of the older population by sex may influence how future generations of older people experience aging in the United States.