

Caring for the Elderly: Population Trends Affecting Families

Clifton E. Barber, Ph.D.¹

Several significant changes are occurring simultaneously in our population, including the aging of the general population, the aging of the older population itself, and the growing number of women among the elderly. These changes are having--and will continue to have--important impacts on the American family. One of these impacts is the fact that an increasing number of families will face the responsibility of caring for one or more elderly loved ones who are frail and dependent.

The Aging of the U.S. Population

With respect to the aging of the general population, in 1900, people 65 and older represented just 4 percent of the total population (about 3 million people). Today, 12.6 percent of all Americans are 65 and over (31.2 million). By the year 2030, people 65 and over are expected to represent 21.8 percent of the population! By comparison, the percent of Florida's older population today is 18 percent. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

The Aging of the Older Population

The aging of our population is most dramatic among those age 85 or older, the frailest segment of the population and those most likely to require help from family members. The number of people 85 and over rose 165 percent between 1960 and 1980, and is expected to be seven times as large in 2050 as in 1980. Between 1984 and 2050, the population aged 85 and over is expected to increase from 1 percent to over 5 percent of the total population, and from 9 percent to 24 percent of the age 65 and over population. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

Increasing Number of Older Women

Another trend is the disproportionate number of females in the elderly population. In 1990, there were 19 million women and 13 million men 65 and over. This difference in the number of older women versus older men increases with age. For example, among those 65 to 69, there are 84 men for every 100 women. Among those 85 and over, the gap widens to 39 men for every 100 women.

Because women on the average live seven years longer than men (79 vs. 72), elderly women are more likely than elderly men to be living alone. Further, they are more likely to experience poverty and multiple chronic health problems. Consequently, elderly women are more likely to need assistance from children, other relatives, friends or neighbors. (See Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.)

Impact of the Population Trends on the Family

The aging of the American population has greatly affected the American family. In 1963, one-quarter of people over 65 had a surviving parent. By the early 1970's, one-quarter of people in their late 50s had a surviving mother or father. By 1980, 40 percent of people in their late 50s had at least one surviving parent, as did one-fifth of those in their 60s! Ten percent of those in their late 60s, and 3 percent of those in their 70s! In other words, one out of every 10 people 65 and over had a child of at least 65.

Declining birth rates, coupled with increased life expectancy, have had a dramatic effect on family caregiving. **For the first time in American history, the average married couple has more parents than children.** Furthermore, women can expect to spend more

1. Colorado State University professor, human development and family studies. CD03. 10/93. ©Colorado State University Cooperative Extension. 1994. For more information, contact your county Cooperative Extension office.

years caring for an aging parent than for a dependent child. In 1900, for example, a woman spent 19 years with a child and only nine years with an aging parent. Today, the average woman will spend 17 years of her adult life caring for a dependent child and 18 years helping one of her (or her spouse's) aging parents.

Studies of Family Caregivers

The impact of the "graying" of America on the family has prompted many studies on caring for elderly loved ones. These studies include a focus on spousal care as well as adult children caring for aging parents.

Two of the most well-known studies include the 1982 Long-Term Care Survey conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, and the 1988 National Survey of Caregivers conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons and The Travelers Companies Foundation.

References

The American Association of Retired Persons and the Administration on Aging. 1991. *A Profile of Older Americans* (free): AARP Fulfillment, 601 E Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20049.

Aging America: Trends and Projections 1991
Edition: The Special Committee on Aging, United States Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510.

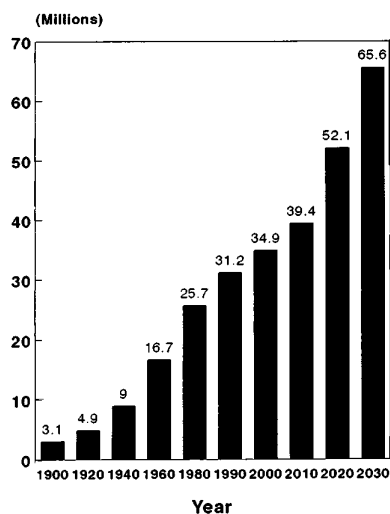


Figure 1. Number of persons 65 and over: 1900 to 2030.

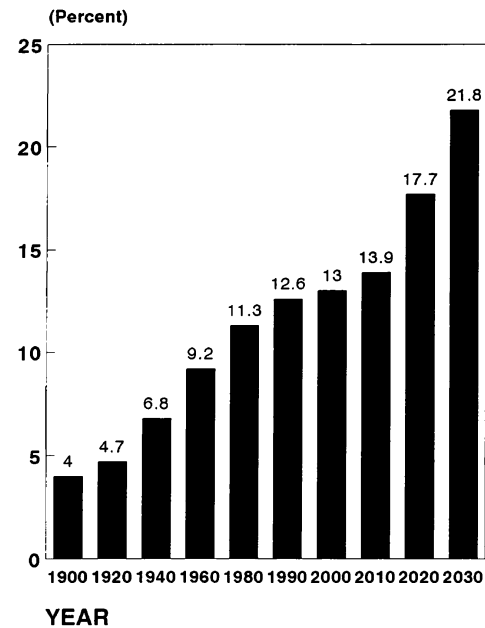


Figure 2. Percent of persons 65 and over: 1900 to 2030.

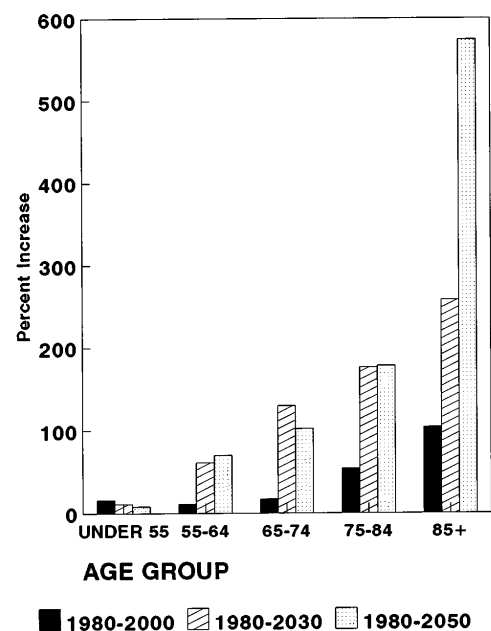


Figure 3. Projected growth in population by age group: 1980-2050.

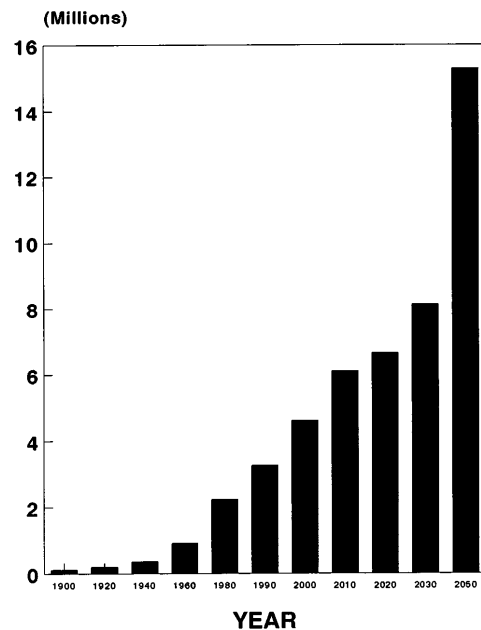


Figure 4. Number of persons 85 and over: 1900 to 2050.

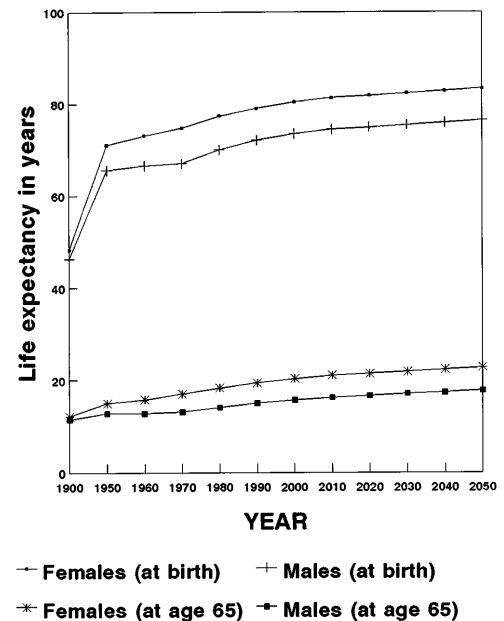


Figure 6. Actual and projected life expectancy for males and females at birth and age 65.

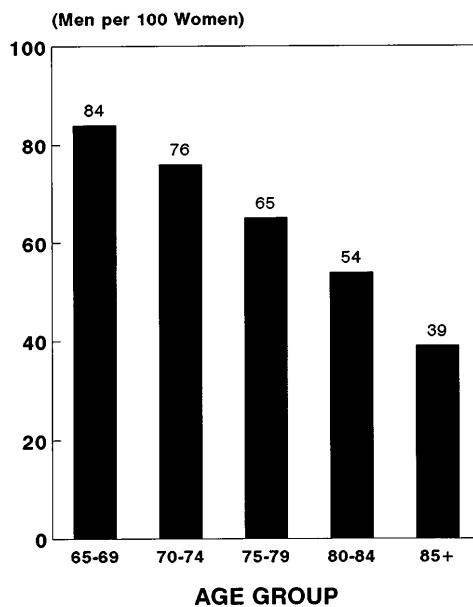


Figure 5. The number of men per 100 women by age group.

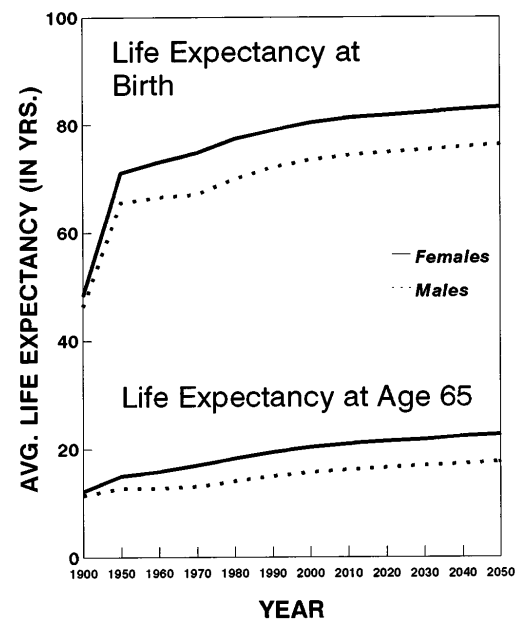


Figure 7. Gender differences in actual and projected life expectancy.

The Graying of America

The older population (65+) numbered 31.2 million in 1990. They represented 12.6% of the U.S. population (about one in eight Americans). The number of older Americans increased by 5.7 million or 22% since 1980, compared to an increase of 8 percent for the under-65 population.

Since 1900, the percentage of Americans age 65+ has tripled (from 4 percent to 12 percent).

The older population itself is getting older. In 1990, the 65 to 74 age group (18.1 million) was eight times larger than in 1900, but the 75 to 84 group (10.1 million) was 13 times larger, and the 85+ group (3.1 million) was 24 times larger.

In 1990, there were 18.7 million older women and 12.6 million older men, or a sex ratio of 149 women for every 100 men. The number of men per 100 women decreases with age.

A child born in 1989 could expect to live 75.2 years; about 28 years longer than a child born in 1900. The major part of this increase occurred because of reduced death rates for children and young adults.

In 1989, people reaching 65 had an average life expectancy of 17.2 additional years (18.8 years for women and 15.2 years for men). Life expectancy at 65 increased by only 2.4 years between 1900 and 1960, but has increased by 2.9 years since 1960.

The older population is expected to continue to grow in the future. This growth will slow somewhat during the 1990's because of the relatively small number of children born during the Great Depression in the 1930's. The most rapid increase is expected between the years 2010 and 2030, the "baby boom" generation reaches age 65. By the year 2030, there will be about 66 million older people, representing 21.8 percent of the total population.
