

CHAPTER 1: THE OLDER POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Chapter Outline

- I. Changing Demographics of the U.S. Population
 - A. Changes in Life Expectancy
 - B. Gender Differences in Life Expectancy
 - C. Racial Differences in Life Expectancy
- II. Maximum Life Span
 - A. Population Pyramids
- III. Support and Dependency Ratios
- IV. The Rapid Growth of the Old-Old and Oldest-Old
 - A. Who Are the Oldest-Old?
 - B. Centenarians and Super-Centenarians
 - 1. The Role of Genes
 - 2. The Role of the Environment
- V. Increasing Diversity among the Older Population
 - A. Elders of Color
 - B. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Elders
 - C. Geographic Distribution
 - D. Geographic Distribution among Elders of Color
 - E. Educational and Economic Status
- VI. Longevity in Health or Disease? What does the Future Hold?
- VII. Summary

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 introduces the changing demographics of the United States. One factor to consider is life expectancy, which is the average length of time one would expect to live if one were born in a particular year and if death rates were to remain constant. Another important factor is gender differences in life expectancy. On average, females born today will live 5-6 years longer than men. Racial differences also exist. It is not surprising that older people of color in the U.S. have a lower life expectancy when compared to whites. Maximum life span is the length of years a given species could expect to live if all environmental hazards were eliminated. Maximum life span influences the population pyramid. Population pyramids capture the changing age distribution of the American population. It is important to visually see this shift in the proportion of older adults in relation to younger persons to fully understand the magnitude of this phenomenon. Our changing population can also be analyzed through factors such as the dependency ratio and support ratio.

Demographers project that the oldest old will reach 19 million or 4 percent of the U.S. population by 2050. The old-old is the age group are those who are aged 75 to 84. The number of centenarians, those 100 years and older, is also increasing in society. There is even an increase in super-centenarians, those who are 110 years and older. Researchers are studying to see what role genetic makeup and the environment may have on the length of life. The population of older adults in the U.S. is also becoming more ethnically diverse, although elders of color generally have a lower life expectancy due to health and economic disparities. The older

population is also becoming more diverse in terms of those who are identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). There are also differences with economic well-being among the elderly when race and ethnicity become a factor.

The growth of the older population has raised questions as to whether our nation is prepared to meet the health care and social service needs of this group and their families. Other factors of concern involve who would receive what resources and what roles will be played by informal and formal sectors of society. Society also needs to examine the increasing number of healthy elders who want to continue to be employed, participate in their communities, volunteer and live in their own homes as long as possible.

Learning Objectives

After reading chapter 1 the student should be able to:

- 1.1 Demonstrate knowledge of changing demographics of the U.S. aging population
- 1.2 Describe the increasing diversity among the older population and its social impact
- 1.3 Discuss the need to plan and prepare for an aging population

Key Terms

Active Life Expectancy: a way of describing expected length of life, the term *active* denoting a manner of living that is relatively healthy and independent of others (p. 30)

Centenarians: people in the population of 100 years or older (p. 21)

Chronic Diseases: Diseases, like heart disease and diabetes, that requires long-term medical care and related health care services (p. 13)

Compression of Morbidity: relatively long periods of healthy, active, high-quality existence and relatively short periods of illness and dependency in the last few years of life (p. 29)

Crossover Effect: elders of color (mostly men) who survive beyond age 75 having longer life expectancies after age 75 than their white counterparts (p. 15)

Demographers: a person who studies populations and population trends and characteristics (p. 20)

Demographic Trends: changes that occur in populations, such as the increase in median age (p. 11)

Demographics: the study of populations, such as human populations and their characteristics in a society (p. 11)

Dependency Ratio: refers to the number of people age 65 and older to every 100 people of traditional working ages (defined as 18-64) (p. 19)

Dependent Life Expectancy: a way of describing expected length of life, *dependent* on help from others (p. 30)

Hardiness: how well an individual copes with disease or other stressors. Genetics and past experience affect *hardiness* (p. 22)

Individual Aging Process: the physiological, psychological, and social aging process in a person, as opposed to population aging, which refers to the aging of an entire population (p. 11)

Life Expectancy: the average length of time persons in a given society, and subgroups defined by age, gender, race and ethnicity are expected to live (p. 12)

Maximum Life Span: biologically programmed maximum number of years that each species can expect to live (p. 16)

Median Age: the age when half the population is younger, and half older than the individual or group of interest (p. 12)

Old-Old: people who are 75-84 years old (p. 19)

Oldest-Old: people age 85 and older (p. 19)

Population Aging: the aging of an entire population, such as the aging of people within a particular county, as opposed to the individual aging process of an individual (p. 11)

Super-Centenarians: older adults who have reached age 110 and beyond (p. 21)

Support Ratio: the relationship between the proportion of the population that is employed (defined as “productive” and able to support others) and the percentage that is not in the workforce (viewed as “dependent” or as “requiring support”) (p. 19)

Discussion Topics

- Describe the three historical and cultural factors that have influenced the baby boom generation.
- Compare and contrast the differences and similarities between life expectancy, life span, longevity, and active life expectancy? How are these defined?
- Discuss how demographics are changing in the U.S. population and how aging can influence this.
- What are the benefits and weaknesses of using population pyramids to exam life span? Describe a situation where it would be appropriate to use a population pyramid when discussing the elderly in the U.S.

- What historical and cultural factors have influenced the rapid growth of the old-old and oldest old? Who are the oldest old?
- Discuss the benefits of studying social gerontology from a person-environment perspective, focusing on the competence model.
- Discuss the increasing diversity among the older population. Specifically address the unique groups of elders of color, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and the transgender (LGBT) elderly.
- Discuss the geographic distribution of the older U.S. population and implications for policies in states with higher and lower than average proportions of older persons in their population.
- What evidence is there for potential biological differences between centenarians and others who survive to their 70s and 80s?
- Compare the educational and economic status of the elderly in American society. Be able to justify your answer.
- Describe what the future looks like regarding longevity in health or disease when discussing the elderly. What are some of the positive aspects of aging? What are some of the negative aspects of aging?

Classroom Activities and Student Projects

Activity 1.1 Attend a Conference

Find out if there is a state, regional, or local gerontological society/organization meeting in your area and have your students attend one of their conferences. Another option would be for you and your students to attend a sociological or psychological conference which has a section on aging. Have the students attend a session and write 3–5 page papers about what they heard about aging.

Activity 1.2 Analyze a Census Brief

The Census Bureau produced a series of briefs based on the Census 2000 findings. One brief is entitled *The 65 and Older Population 2000: Census 2000 Brief* and can be accessed at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-10.pdf>. Have the students download this document and bring it to class. This document contains a wealth of demographic data on older adults in the United States, including statistics on age, gender, residential location, etc. Ask the students what conclusions can be made from reading this document.

Activity 1.3 Matching Game

List characteristics of the research approaches (e.g., longitudinal research, cross-sectional research) on note cards and have students match the characteristic with the type of research it describes. Have two teams compete to see who can complete the task first.

Activity 1.4 Scavenger Hunt

Assign groups of students a decade ranging from 1910 – 2010 and ask them to bring facts about the decade to the following class meeting. Have each group present what they learned about the decade and apply it to the corresponding cohort.

Suggested Films

Age (2002)

Insight Media, 30 minutes, \$139 VHS

This film presents the terminology that serves as the foundation of social gerontology, such as age cohort and life expectancy and discusses societal implications of an aging population.

Age Issues: From Young to Old (2001)

Insight Media, 60 minutes, \$139 DVD

This film looks at the issues and roles of aging individuals in the United States.

Angelus Plaza: A New Look at Old Age (2001)

Filmmakers Library, 27 minutes, \$250 VHS/DVD

This film portrays three active, lively older adults who, despite the usual physical complaints of old age, demonstrate a new definition of later life.

Growing Old (2006)

Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 74 minutes, \$169.95 DVD/VOD

This film examines various realities as one grows older from medical to financial issues.

Stages (2012)

New Day Films, 83 minutes, \$275 DVD

A moving portrait of aging Puerto Rican women and urban teenagers collaboratively creating a play out of the stories of their lives.

Surfing for Life (2001)

David Brown, 56 minutes, \$49 VHS/\$51 DVD

This film profiles 10 older surfers as inspirational models of healthy and successful aging.

Discussion guide at www.surfingforlife.com

Suggested Websites

Administration on Aging (AOA)

http://www.aoa.gov/AoA_programs/Tools_Resources/diversity.aspx

This site discusses the diversity of older Americans in the U.S. There are many informative links which discuss cultural competency and diversity.

The Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics (FIFARS)

http://agingstats.gov/agingstatsdotnet/main_site/default.aspx

Many federal agencies are part of FIFARS, which provides tables and statistics on many issues related to older adults, such as education, poverty, and health.

The Gerontological Society of America (GSA)

<http://www.geron.org/>

This site provides a wealth of information on the organization, its conferences, and its resources.

Time Health and Family

<http://healthland.time.com/2009/08/21/is-there-a-maximum-age-to-which-humans-can-live/>

An article looking into the various factors about how long a human can live. It also addresses if possible to determine how long a human can live.

The New England Centenarian

<http://www.bumc.bu.edu/centenarian/>

This site is home to the New England Centenarian Study, which is sponsored by the Boston University Medical College and has been studying centenarians for a decade. Information about the study, its findings, and case studies of centenarians can be accessed here.

Population Reference Bureau

<http://www.prb.org/Publications/Reports/2011/americas-aging-population.aspx>

This site looks at the current and future trends in the United States as we are living longer and the implications this will bring.

Additional Resources

Altpeter, Mary and Victor W. Marshall. 2003. "Making Aging "Real" for Undergraduates." *Educational Gerontology*. 29:739–756.

Clark, Philip G. 2002. "Values and voices in teaching gerontology and geriatrics: Case studies as stories." *The Gerontologist*. 42:297–307

Langer, Nieli and Terry Tirrito. 2004. *Aging Education*. University Press of America, Inc.

The National Center for Health and the Aging. 2013. *Evidence-Based Programs and Resources for Changing Behavior in Older Adults*. The National Center for Health and the Aging.

Unlenberg, Peter (Ed). 2009. *International Handbook of Aging Population*. Spring Publishing Company.

Waite, Linda J. (Ed). 2012. *Perspectives on the Future of the Sociology of Aging*. The National Academies Press.