

Statistical Brief

From the Bureau of the Census



Age Structure of the U.S. Population in the 21st Century

In less than 40 years, every fifth person in the United States will be 65 years or older.

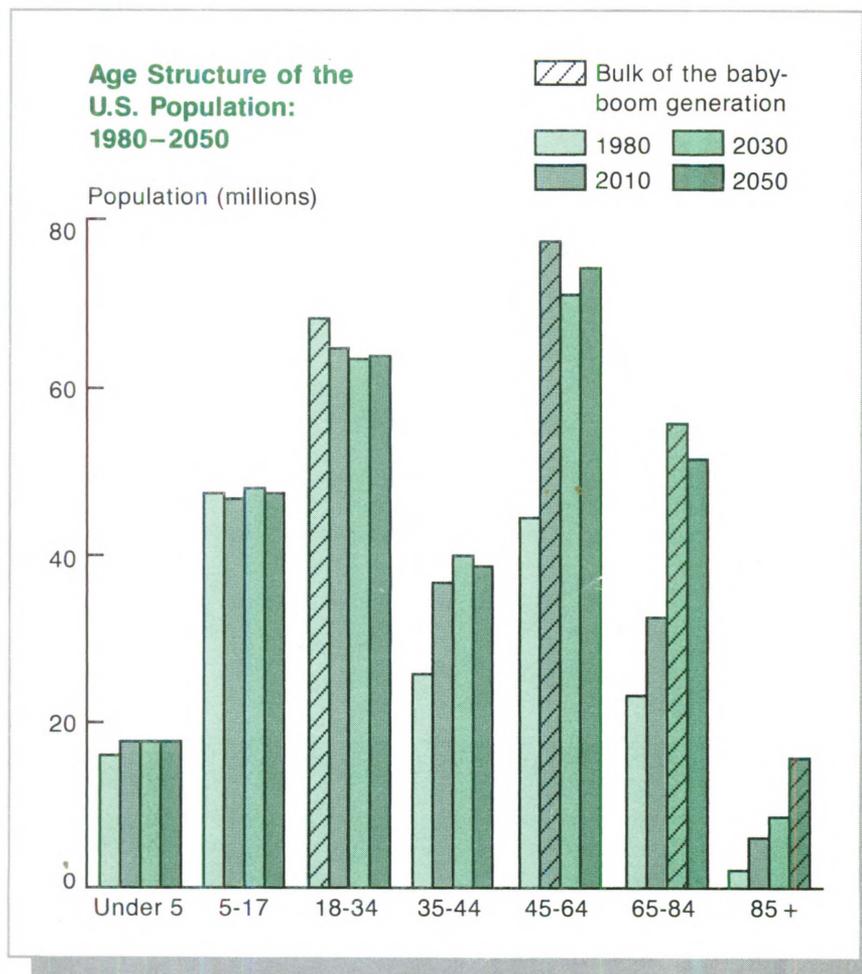
Although the total population of the United States will grow at a relatively slow rate, the age structure will be dramatically different from anything we have experienced before. While the age groups under 35 in 2010 and under 65 in 2030 will have virtually stopped growing, the number of persons 65 and over will increase sharply beginning in 2010. This Brief describes the age structure of the U.S. population in the 21st century, focusing on the elderly. The numbers used here are the Census Bureau's middle-series projections of the population. They depend on assumptions about future levels of fertility, mortality, and net immigration which imply no extreme changes in any of these components.

The rapid future growth of the elderly after 2010 depends mostly on an event of the past—the baby boom.

The baby-boom generation, born during the high fertility years of 1946 to 1964, now represents about one-third of the population. As they age, their large numbers will cause cycles of relative growth and decline at each stage of life. The aging of the baby-boom generation will push the median age, now at 31 years, to over 38 years by 2010 and to almost 42 years by 2050.

The years from 1985 through 2020 cover the most economically productive years for the baby-boom generation. In 2010, the oldest members of the baby boom will be nearing 65 and the youngest members will have just passed 45. As the baby-boom

cohorts begin to reach age 65 starting in 2011, the number of elderly persons, particularly the younger segment, will rise dramatically—by 2030, the baby-boom cohort will be the young-old, 65 to 84 years of age.



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Average Annual Rate of Growth

(In percent)

	1980-2010	2010-2030		1980-2010	2010-2030
Total, all ages	+0.8	+0.4	Adult (35-44)	+1.4	+0.5
Preschool (under 5)	+0.3	*	Empty nest (45-64)	+2.5	-0.4
School age (5-17)	*	+0.1	Young old (65-74)	+1.0	+3.5
Young adult (18-34)	-0.2	-0.1	Aged (75+)	+2.9	+3.0

*Less than 0.1%

Today, 1 in 100 Americans is 85 years or older; in 2050, 1 in 20 persons could be so old. Persons 85 and older could constitute close to one-quarter of the older population by then.

In about 2030, the final phase of the gerontological explosion caused by the baby-boom generation will begin. The growth of the younger segment of the elderly population will begin to decelerate as persons born in the baby-bust period following 1964 reach age 65. After 2030, the population aged 85 and over will be the only older age group still growing and will have increased from 2.7 million now to 8.6 million in 2030 and to over 16 million by 2050. The proportion of the older population who are 85 and over (the oldest old) will grow from about 9 percent now to almost 17 percent in the next two decades and to almost one-fourth by the middle of the next century. In 1980, the median age of elderly persons was 73; by 2010, the median will move up to almost 75 and by 2050 to 77.

Among the aged, women outnumber men 3 to 2. That imbalance increases to more than 2 to 1 for persons 85 and over.

Concerns associated with problems of the older population are exacerbated by the large excess of women over men in the older ages, perhaps reaching almost 12.5 million among persons 65 and over in 2050. Older women are more likely than older men to be widowed, living alone, poor, and to suffer from chronic health conditions. Also, among persons 65 and over, women tend to be older than men: in 1980, 7 percent of men and 10 percent of women 65 or older were 85 or older and by 2050, 17 percent of older men and 28 percent of older women could be 85 or older.

A sizable group of persons 65 or older, perhaps as many as one-third, could have a living parent in 2050.

Increased longevity and the aging of the baby boom will mean that more persons will find themselves caring

for very old persons after they themselves have reached retirement age. One way of determining the impact of very old parents is by examining the numbers of the oldest old relative to the size of the likely age groups of their adult sons and daughters. Assuming generations are separated by 25 years, persons 85 and over would have children who are 60 to 74 years of age. In 1980, there were about 9 persons 85 and over per 100 persons 60 to 74. That ratio is predicted to double by 2010 and reach 33 per 100 when the large baby boom cohort reaches 85 and over in 2050. In other words, every third person 60 to 74 years old could have an elderly living parent.

Relatively small changes in the sizes of younger age groups combined with the substantial increase in the elderly population will yield equal numbers of the very young and the old.

Now there are more than twice as many children as there are elderly persons. By 2030, the proportion of children will have shrunk and the proportion elderly will have grown until these two groups are approximately equal at just over one-fifth of the population each. During the same period, the working-age population will grow steadily, peaking

in 2015 when most members of the baby boom have not yet retired and most of their children are adults. Various other factors such as immigration, laws governing work, retirement, and Social Security, as well as overall economic conditions could all influence the ability of the working-age population to support the young and those elderly who are in need.

There are few certainties about the future, but the demographic outlook seems relatively clear, at least for persons already born. Careful consideration of the impact of our aging population can be a powerful tool in planning for a secure future.

For Further Information

See: Current Population Reports, Series P-25, No. 952, *Projections of the Population of the United States, by Age, Sex, and Race: 1983 to 2080.*

Contact: Gregory Spencer
(301) 763-5964
or
Jennifer Marks
(301) 763-3814

This is one of a series of occasional reports providing timely data on specific policy-related issues. Future briefs will cover children and their participation in government assistance programs and ownership of individual retirement accounts.

