Aging in the United States—Past, Present, and Future
The progressive growth of the elderly (age 65 and over) population and the future influence of the Baby-Boom generation (persons born between 1946 and 1964) can be seen by examining age-sex population pyramids for 1960 to 2020. The 1960 pyramid shows a marked “pinch” for ages 20-29 years, a result of exceptionally low birth rates during the Depression years. The Baby-Boom bulge appears in the 1960 pyramid in the ages 0 to 14. During periods of fluctuating births and improving survivorship, the elderly grew from 5 percent of the U.S. population in 1930 to nearly 13 percent by 1990.

In the 1990s, Baby Boomers are in their economically productive years and represent nearly one-third of the U.S. population. When the Baby-Boom generation begins turning age 65 in 2011, there will be a rapid growth in the number of persons 65 and over. Just as this generation had an impact on the educational system and the labor market, this large cohort will strain services and programs required by an elderly population. By 2020, the Baby Boomers will be pre- and early-retirement ages (55 to 64 years) and the young old ages (65 to 74 years). Between 1990 and 2020, the population age 65 to 74 would grow 74 percent under middle series projections, while the population under age 65 would increase only 24 percent.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.
Elderly Women More Likely to Live Alone

Among the U.S. elderly in 1995, women outnumbered men 3 to 2. At ages 85 and over, there were 5 women to every 2 men. Higher female life expectancy, combined with the fact that men generally are older than their spouses, contributes to the higher proportions of elderly women living alone. In 1995, 9.8 million persons age 65 or older lived alone. Eight in ten (77 percent) were women; 7 in 10 (70 percent) were White women.

Widowhood also increases with age among the elderly and is greater for women than men. Among elderly women age 65 to 74, 75 to 84, and 85 years and over in 1995, the percentages currently widowed were 33, 59, and 81, respectively. Elderly men in these age groups were much less likely to be widowers: 9, 18, and 41 percent, respectively.

Among noninstitutionalized persons age 65 to 74 in 1995, 64 percent were married and living with their spouse, and 24 percent were living alone. As age increases, so does the proportion living alone. Among those age 85 and over, only 21 percent lived with their spouse, and 54 percent lived alone.


Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.
Baby-Boom Generation to Accelerate Elderly and Oldest Old Growth

The elderly population grew rapidly throughout the country's history. From 1900 to 1960, the elderly increased 10-fold, while the population under age 65 was only 2.2 times larger. Between 1960 and 1990, the elderly grew by 88 percent, compared to 34 percent for persons under age 65.

During the period 1990-2010, the elderly growth rate will be lower than during any 20-year period since 1910, a result of the low fertility of the 1930s. After this slow-growth period, an elderly population explosion between 2010 and 2030 is inevitable as the Baby-Boom generation reaches age 65. About 1 in 5 U.S. citizens will be elderly by 2030. The elderly population numbered 30 million in 1988, will not reach 40 million until 2011, then will reach 50 million in only 8 years (2019).

The oldest old, 3.5 million persons in 1994, represented just over 1 percent of the U.S. population. By 2020, the size of the population age 85 and over is projected to double to 7 million. The oldest old will again double to 14 million by 2040 as the survivors of the Baby-Boom cohort reach the oldest ages. Under the "highest" projection series, the oldest old could number as many as 31 million in 2050 (See Sources and Quality of Data). Since the oldest old often have severe chronic health problems which demand special attention, the rapid growth of this population group has many implications for individuals, families, and governments.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.