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Census Report Foresees No Crisis Over Aging Generation's Health

By [RICK LYMAN](#)

The next few decades will see an explosion in the percentage of Americans over the age of 65, but the economic and social impact of this baby boomer sunset may be gentler than had been feared because of a significant drop in the percentage of older people with disabilities, a new federal study has concluded.

Released yesterday, the United States Census Bureau's 243-page report on the aging population, among the largest and most comprehensive on the subject that the bureau has ever compiled, showed that today's older Americans are markedly different from previous generations. They are more prosperous, better educated and healthier, and those differences will only accelerate as the first boomers hit retirement age in 2011.

"Older Americans, when compared to older Americans even 20 years ago, are showing substantially less disability, and that benefit applies to men and to women," said Richard J. Hodes, director of the National Institute on Aging, on whose behalf the study was conducted. "All of this speaks to an improved quality of life."

What this suggests, Dr. Hodes said, is that while many of these older Americans will eventually become disabled, it will happen later with more of the years beyond 65 free of disability — an increase in what scientists call health expectancy.

And while, as baby boomers age, the growing ranks of the infirm will become a substantial drain on government coffers and devour health care resources, the total impact may not be as devastating as once feared, Dr. Hodes said.

The study showed that the percentage of those over 65 who had a disability that the report described as "a substantial limitation in a major life activity" fell to 19.7 percent in 1999 from 26.2 percent in 1982. There were signs the trend would continue.

Richard Suzman, head of the Behavioral and Social Research Program for the National Institute on Aging, said there was disagreement among those analyzing the results about why this drop occurred. But they assumed, he said, that it was at least partly a result of today's older Americans' being better educated and more prosperous than previous generations.

"People today have a better health expectancy than did their predecessors," Mr. Suzman said. "Education, in particular, is a particularly powerful factor in both life expectancy and health expectancy, though truthfully, we're not quite sure why."

Dr. Hodes cautioned that the growing [obesity](#) rate in America may neutralize the positive trend.

The new study, "65+ in the United States: 2005," involved no fresh research but was an effort to draw together all of the relevant information on America's aging population from nearly a dozen federal agencies, said Charles Louis Kincannon, director of the Census Bureau.

"The report tells us that the face of America is changing," he said.

In 1900, Mr. Kincannon said, there were 120,000 Americans over age 85, about 0.1 percent of the population. Today there are more than four million, about 1 percent. Indeed, Mr. Kincannon said, it is the nation's fastest-growing age group.

In July 2003, there were 35.9 million Americans over the age of 65, about 12 percent of the population. By 2030, federal officials predict, there will be 72 million older people, about 20 percent of Americans.

And they will be a substantially different class of people than previous generations. In 1959, 35 percent of people over 65 lived in poverty. By 2003, that figure had dropped to 10 percent. The proportion of older Americans with a high school diploma rose to 71.5 percent in 2003 from 17 percent in 1950.

All of these trends are expected to accelerate, and soon. "The future older population is likely to be better educated than the current older population, especially when baby boomers start reaching age 65," the report concluded. "Their increased levels of education may accompany better health, higher incomes and more wealth, and consequently higher standards of living in retirement."

And as younger workers become scarcer, many companies will have to find ways to convince their older workers to stay on the job longer, Mr. Kincannon said.

The report was not all good news.

Divorce is on the rise among older Americans, the study found, leading to concerns that broken families combined with low birth rates among baby boomers may create a situation where fewer people are available or willing to help care for their aging relatives, pushing even more of the burden onto government.

Also, the drop in poverty has not happened across all population groups. "There are subgroups among the old who still have fairly high levels of poverty, including older women, and especially those who live alone," said Victoria A. Velkoff, chief of the aging studies branch at the Census Bureau.

Ms. Velkoff said that while the aging population was more diverse than previous generations, poverty hit blacks and Hispanics, especially women, harder than whites. While 10 percent of older white women lived in poverty in 2003, 21.4 percent of older Hispanic women and 27.4 percent of older black women did.