

Older Adults as a Social and Demographic Group In the Structure of the US Population (1960-2010)

*Nataliya Chahrak, Ph.D., docent
Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University
Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine*

Abstract

The article provides the analysis of the social and demographic characteristics of older adults in the United States in the 1960-2010s. Scientific-and-technological advance and socio-economic development in the USA have led to a significant change in the characteristics and intensity of demographic process. In the USA, the percentage of older people is expected to rise to about 25-30% by 2030, which means one in three persons will be over 60. It means that population ageing: a) will continue to influence a change in the structure of the US population; the birth rates decrease and the rise in life expectancy causes a change in the structure of life course; b) affects all aspects of social life including politics, economy, education, social and cultural activities.

This article provides evidence that it is worthwhile to reconsider the traditional approach to the older adult needs. The growing age group of older people have to be ensured the adaptation to rapid economic and social changes. The state policy needs rethinking in the approaches to human potential, recognizing older adults as a valuable part of social and even economic resources, as this cohort is going to win a significant place in demographic and social structure. The social and demographic profile of the US older adult could be useful when encouraging older people to participate in the development process of the country, including work force, social life, education and culture.

Key words: ageing of the population, US population ageing, demographic situation, older adult, baby-boomers.

The second half of the XX century can be defined as a period of global transformations in all spheres of public life. Scientific, technical and socio-economic development in the United States caused significant changes in the nature and intensity of demographic processes, which launched a complex and contradictory set of consequences the country would meet in the near future. First, this concerns the phenomenon of population ageing, which has occurred for the last fifty-year period. Its dynamics is anticipated to increase in the next decades of the XXI century. Aging society is the process of increasing the proportion of older people in the total population, which, consequently, leads to some considerable changes in the age structure of the population – a phenomenon typical for most industrialized countries. Although the population ageing is first of all a demographic process, it is caused by the historical evolution of humanity and, according to statistics, is only possible at a fairly high level of economic, scientific, technical and cultural development of society. It is obvious, that population ageing is a phenomenon of modern civilization and an integral part of social development. At the same time, it cannot be regarded as an exclusively demographic fact, but as economic, social and cultural phenomenon as well. Moreover, three main features characterize this phenomenon:

- firstly, this is one of the most important demographic factors which advance to the foreground in the XXI century: people live longer and

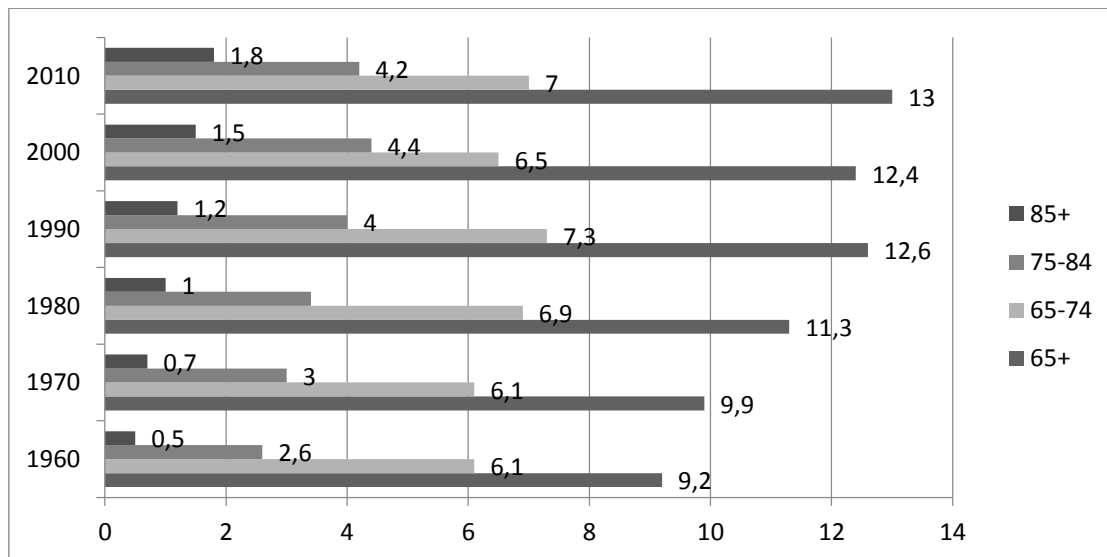
- healthier lives, birth rates are decreasing, and the proportion of older adults in the total population is increasing;
- secondly, population ageing affects all aspects of life, including health care, social security, economy, education, social and cultural activities, and family structure;
 - and thirdly, it means percent reduction of children and young people in the total population and increase of the segment of older people in the demographic structure of society [5, p.17–18].

The growing number of older adults in developed countries and in particular in the United States is the challenge of the XXI century. At the micro level, ageing is a phase of life that, on the one hand, is more or less accessible to everyone (as a result of increasing life expectancy), and on the other hand, ageing is not a period which is characterized by poor health, decline of physical and psychological functioning and man's dependence on others. At the macro level, the distinct rethinking in the approaches to aging and old age is occurring. Nowadays, more developed societies are continuing their rapid social, economic and cultural growth under the guidance of human capital, in which older adults make a fair amount.

It is important to emphasize that during the XX century in the United States though as in most other developed countries, the population over 65 has grown faster than the population under 65. During 1900 – 2010, the number of older people (65+) increased 12 times, from 3.1 million in 1900 to 40.3 million in 2010. In 1960, the total population in the United States formed 179, 3 million people; in 2010, it increased to 308.7 million people. Older adults over 65 made 40.3 million, which was 13% of the total population, in comparison with 16.6 million (9.2%) in 1960. The proportion of older people is expected to increase more rapid in the following decades of the XXI century. In accordance with the prognosis of the UN and the American Institute of Aging, by 2050 the number of people over 65 will more than double – up to 84 million, and the number of persons aged 85 will increase by threefold – up to 18 million [16, p. 5–6].

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of older adults in the total US population during 1960-2010.

Figure 1. The proportion of older people (by age group) in the total US population, 1960-2010:

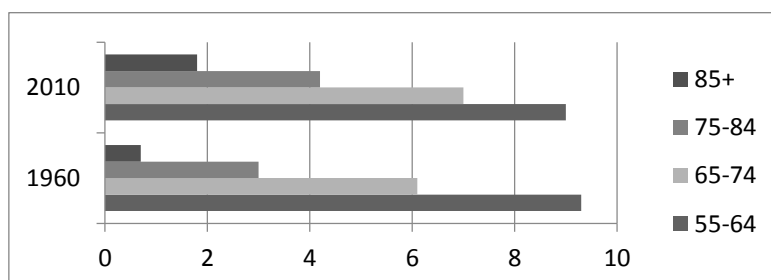


Source: analysis of statistics of U.S. Census Bureau, www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/doc/sf1.pdf

The population ageing is determined by two main factors: a long period of decline in the birth rate and in the mortality. In the USA, there has been a constant decline in mortality among people at a young age since 1960. Accordingly, they are more likely to live up to old age. However, reducing the mortality rate among the US older population, which has taken place over the past decades has led to an increase in life expectancy far below the retirement age and, consequently, increase the number of older adults in the total population. Reducing the intensity of fertility primarily results in reducing the proportion of younger age groups and an increase in the proportion of older people who were born under the previous high fertility. The population explosion of 1946-64 (the baby-boomers generation) in the United States, along with a decrease in the intensity of the process of mortality in older age and increased life expectancy have led to a significant growth in the proportion of older people in the US population at the end of the XX – the beginning of XXI century. Thus, two key factors of US population ageing can be defined: a high birth rate during those years (about 78 million people was born in the period of 1946-64), and an increasing life expectancy. The oldest members of «baby-boomers» generation turned 55 in 2001 and 65 in 2011.

The growing number of older people had a considerable impact on the structure of the population in the United States. In the 1960-70s, children under 15 formed the third part of the US total population, and the seniors aged 65+ made the tenth part, but according to the 2010 census, this proportion has changed significantly: the share of children decreased to $\frac{1}{4}$ in the total population, and the proportion of older persons grew up to $\frac{1}{7}$. Moreover, one in three Americans is a person aged over 50.

Figure 2. The proportion of older people (by age group) in the total population in 1960 and 2010.



Source: analysis of statistics of U.S. Census Bureau, www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/doc/sf1.pdf

The generation of “baby boomers”, which in 1980 was the main segment of the US work force, began to reach retirement age and form the age group of older people at the beginning of XXI century. Accordingly, over the next two decades at least two rapidly growing segments of the population (“young-old”, 55-64 and “old-old”, 65+) has influenced the age composition of the US population. In 2010, the proportion of the baby-boomer generation increased by 31.5% compared to that figure in 2000 and made 81.5 million. This is due to the ageing of baby-boomers, people born in the 1946-64 [16].

It is important to take into account that changes in the age structure of the population leads to significant social and economic consequences, especially when the changes are unexpected. The high birth rate in the United States in the postwar period led to a considerable overload in the areas such as health, education and social security, particularly in the 1946-80. In the 1965-90, that phenomenon influenced the US labor market as well. Accordingly, in the late 1990s – the early 2000s the socio-economic sector required some adaptation to the needs of a growing cohort of older adults. Note, that not only the number or the proportion of older people is an important factor of social and economic policy and program decisions in the country; the qualitative characteristics of this age group such as health, education, living conditions, family relations and economic welfare have to be taken into consideration as well.

Improvements in the quality of health care is one of the key factors of constant increase in the proportion of older people in the US population age structure [16, p. 8]. At the same time, it is necessary to focus attention on the gradual increase in life expectancy, which also resulted in the older population growth in the demographic situation of the United States.

Between 1960 and 2010 life expectancy rose by 9 years (almost by 10 years for men and by 8 years for women). Americans better health and higher quality of life have resulted in a significant increase in the average life expectancy in old age: in 1960, persons aged 65 and over expected to live at least another 14, 3 years, and in 2010, the average length of life after 65 years made 19.2 years. This figure increased for the people aged 75 as well – up to 12.2 years in 2010, compared with 10.4 years in 1980 (in 1960 the statistical data were not collected) [7].

In the United States, there is a difference in life expectancy between men and women, but it was varying during the last fifty years: according to the US Census Bureau, the average life expectancy of women is about 6 years higher. In 1960, the average life expectancy of women and men were 73.1 and 66.6 years; in 2010, these figures increased to 81.1 and 76.2 years respectively. These data suggest that the feminization of old age is one of the significant features of the US demographic situation. In addition, the white Americans live about 7 years longer than black Americans do, although this difference decreased to 4 years in 2010.

The decrease in death rate is another feature of the US demographic situation in the first decade of XXI century. Such decrease has been occurring in all age groups, but the highest rate of mortality decline was recorded in the age groups of 5-14 (32%) and 65-74 (23%). Thus, the death rate at birth is relatively high; it decreases during

childhood and early adulthood, than gradually increases in middle age and increases sharply in the older age. In 2010, the death rate among “young-old age” (55-64) was 8.51 per 1,000 persons. For every next ten years, this figure doubled and the rate was 18.7 for the age group of 65-74 and 47.9 for the elderly (75-84) [12].

The economic characteristics of older adults in the United States.

Older Americans have always occupied an important place in the workforce of the United States. Changes in both the economic situation and social policy of the country have increased the percentage of older people who stay longer in the workforce. As a number of working seniors is growing against the backdrop of ageing society, older workers occupy a great segment of the workforce in the USA. In particular, in 1999 Americans aged 55 formed about 12% of the US workforce, and in 2009 that figure rose to 19% [7, p. 10].

Early retirement has become a common phenomenon during 1970-80s having formed a social class of relatively healthy, active and financially independent retirees. The average retirement age among men fell down from 66 years in the early 1960s to 62 in the late 1990s. Similar figures were seen among women [4, p. 43].

The baby boomers generation faced with more difficult choice about retirement. Certain economic recession and changes in the pension policy of the country, such as: a) working permit after the retirement age; b) increasing a person’s age for full benefits under Social Security program; c) reduction of tax penalties for people who receive Social Security payments (pensions) and also have extra income, – encouraged older adults to stay longer in the workforce.

Among older Americans the trend to continue working career varies by age, gender, and race. Since 1994 there has been a gradual increase in the involvement of older men in the work force of the country, especially in the first decade of the XXI century. In 2012 it reached 23.2%. The older women participation in the workforce of the United States were generally stable during the second half of XX – the early XXI century. Their fraction in the workforce were ranging from 11% to 8%, although the first decade of the XXI century showed a slight tendency to increase of older women participation in the US workforce – up to 14% in 2012 [9, p. 64]; [13].

During 2000 – 2012, the proportion of older adults in the US workforce was increasing. F. Heiland and Zhe Li argue that the changes in the US retirement policy were a key factor of growing number of older persons in the labor force of the country [6]. It is important to emphasize that both older men and older women who have higher educational degree tend to remain in the workforce longer. Thus, the educational level of a person is an important factor of their labor force participation. In addition, older divorced women are more likely to work after the retirement age than married, single and widows do [13]; [11] [8].

Poverty level of older adults.

At the beginning of 1960s, the poverty rate of the population aged 65+ was relatively high. In 1959, it made 35.2%. By 1975, this figure fell by more than a half, to 15.3% and continued to fall gradually over the next decade. The proportion of older people living in poverty decreased mainly during the 1960s - 70s in consequence of the implementation of Social Security Program and the social insurance “Medicare”. According to the Annual Social and Economic Supplement

(ASEC, 2010), in 2010 the poverty rate of older people was 8.9%. Moreover, it was lower than the average rate for the age groups “persons under 18” (22.0%) and “persons aged 18-64” (14.0%) [16, p. 78]; [1]; [11].

It is important to take into consideration that the socio-demographic characteristics of older adults (their marital status, living conditions and education) influence the level of institutionalization of such social phenomenon as the aging society. Based on statistical analysis, key socio-demographic characteristics of older adults in the US can be identified.

1. Marital status and living conditions of older people is closely related to their health, social and economic welfare. In addition, there is a higher level of poverty among older people living alone. Since 1960 there were significant changes in marital status and family structure among older adults, because of the increased divorce rate in that age group, while the birth rate has declined since its peak of 1964.
2. Marital status of older adults varies according to sex: a much higher percentage of men were married (71.7% older men, compared with 42.4% of older women in 1960, and 69.8% to 35.3% respectively in 2010). Such difference can be seen during the 1960 – 2010, and it can be explained by a number of factors, including higher mortality among men, their marriage with slightly younger women, and by the fact that men are more likely to second marriage than women are.
3. The proportion of married older women increased during the period of the 1960 – 2010, while the proportion of married older men increased over the 1960-80s, but it decreased in 2010. Among both older men and older women, the percentage of widowers and widows has been increasing slightly since 1960.
4. The increase in divorce rate (which is defined by the number of divorced people per 1000 married ones) was occurring throughout the 1960 – 2010. In 1962, against a background of overall divorce rate of 2.2, the divorce rate among the persons aged 50+ , the figure was slightly higher - 2.8 (4.2 for men and 1.5 for women) [3, p. 12]. Over the 1990 – 2010, the divorce rate among older men and women increased notably. Against the background of the falling in the numbers of divorces among Americans, which has happened since the 1980s, the divorce rate among older adults increased from 1.8% in 1990 to 4.8% in 2010 [16].
5. Singularity of ageing (increase in the number of older people who live alone without spouses or relatives) varies in different age group: the older a person is, the more likely he/she is to live alone. On the other hand, the living arrangements of older adults are closely related to their family status. High level of widowhood among older women lead to a sharp gender differences in the living arrangements of older adults. Over the 1960 – 2010, the vast majority of older adults lived with their spouses separately from other relatives. Moreover, the percentage of married older people was growing between 1980 – 2010, which can be explained by the increase in life expectancy. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2010 the percentage of

older adults who lived with their spouses separately from other family members, was 43.3%, but over the 1960 – 2010, the proportion of men in such living arrangements was much higher – by about 15-20% [16, p. 131]; [10]; [2, p. 3].

6. A great segment of older adults lived alone, and that figure increased significantly during the 1970-80s. In 1960, the part of older people who lived alone made 18.6%; in 1984, the figure rose by 12% – up to 30.6%, and by 2010 it dropped slightly – to 28.3%. Older women were more likely to live with other family members (17%) than older men (7%) did. A key reason for that difference was the growing number of divorces within the age group of older people. Note that the percentage of older women who lived alone was much higher than that of older men was. This could be due to a lower life expectancy of men and their greater chances for second marriage [10].

Thus, major changes in the living arrangements of older adults, which took place during 1960 – 2010, can be defined by the following characteristics:

- in the early 1960s, about one fifth of older adults lived alone; in 1984, the share increased to 3.1 and remained at about that level until 2012;
- the percentage of older people who lived with their spouses separately from other family members made increased by 9% in 1984 in comparison with that figure of the early 1960s and made 45.8%. Over the next decades that figure has not significantly changed;
- older adults were more likely to live separate (alone or with a spouse), due to a higher level of financial and social support.

An important feature of the socio-economic situation of older people in the United States is their welfare rate. According to the criteria developed by the Stanford Center of Longevity, the welfare index of older people (IWOP) includes the following components: a) financial well-being; b) physical health; c) social inclusion; d) emotional well-being. According to the research, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the USA demonstrate the highest rate of well-being. Compared with these countries, the United States has some lower rate of physical health of older people, while it demonstrates a high level of social and emotional well-being of older people of all age groups (55-64; 65-74; 75 and over) [7, p. 8].

Educational characteristics of older Americans.

The analysis of the US Census Bureau data has shown that the level of education of older adults (both men and women) increased in every following generation of Americans. In 1962, 16.2% of older men had at least four years of secondary school, compared to 79.2% in 2012. However, in 1962, the percentage of men with higher education was 4.4%, and in 2012 it rose to 27.9%. During the 1960 – 2010, the percentage of highly educated older women showed rapid growth as well. In 1960, 21.5% of older women had at least four completed years of secondary school, and in 2012, this figure increased to 78.5%. Accordingly, the percentage of women with higher education increased from 3.2% to 17.1% respectively [10].

A considerable increase in the number of highly educated older adults took place over the 1990 - 2000s. It is also important to note that the percentage of older men and women who completed courses in a secondary school grew rapidly during that

period, while increase in the percentage of older people with higher education showed some different dynamic. By 1980, the proportion of older men and older women with higher education remained almost at the same level, with a small (about 1%) advantage among men. A significant differentiation took place in 1980: the share of older men with higher education prevailed. There were at least two key reasons for such difference:

a) in accordance with GI. Bill of Rights of 1944, the US government encouraged the veterans of World War II to study at colleges or universities by providing tuition fees and stipends;

b) during the 1950-60s, most women, having created a family did not continue college or university education any more. However, in the late 1990s – the first decade of the 2000s, the number of older people with higher education increased: the “baby-boomers”, who generally had better opportunities for education during early adulthood, reached their retirement ages.

In conclusion, the analysis of socio-demographic characteristics of the age group “older adults” give grounds for creating a general profile of older Americans of the 1960 – 2010. In the 1960-80s, older people formed in average 10 % of the total US population; in the 1990 – 2010, this figure rose to 12.5-13%. During that period there was a marked decline in their labor force participation, people aged 55 and over (with a predominance of men) formed about a third part of the American workforce. In the 1970-80-ies, the early retirement was prevailing among older adults: an average retirement age was 63 years for men and 60 for women. In the early 1960s, older adults experienced relatively high rate of poverty, but by the mid-1970s, it started a significant decline.

Thus, the rough profile of the US older adult in the 1960 – 2010 can be designed as: a) a man (married, perhaps for the second time)

with a sufficient level of financial well-being,

who also has a completed courses of secondary vocational education,

who lives with his spouse separately from other family members,

and who continues his professional activity (full or part time) up to about 63;

b) a woman (mostly divorced or widow)

with an acceptable level of financial well-being,

who completed secondary education,

who lives with relatives or alone,

and who continues her professional activities up to 60.

The generation of baby-boomers, that reached their third age or retirement ages in 2001 – 2011, can be described as a highly educated person with a sufficient financial well-being and social support, who prefer longer professional carriers and are more likely to participate actively in all areas of social life.

Thus, these analytic data have to be analyzed in terms of the successful ageing and active ageing theories as well as older adult education. According to the UN prognosis, by 2030, older people will make about a third part of the total US population. This means that older adults will participate in all spheres of social, politic, economic and cultural life, which also means a challenge for educational system, as they should be well prepared to their new roles.

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