# Changing Demographics of the American Population

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**KEYWORDS**

• Geriatric • Demographics • United States

**KEY POINTS**

- Currently in the United States, 1 in 9 Americans is aged 65 years or older; by 2050, this will increase to 1 in 5 Americans.
- The distribution of men and women who are older than 85 years—the oldest-old—will increase substantially by 2050.
- The prevalence and severity of comorbidity—the co-occurrence of multiple chronic conditions—will also increase.
- Life expectancy at 65 years of age has increased more in the past 30 years than in the entire 200-year period from 1750 to 1950; today, a person aged 65 years can expect to live another 15 years.
- Mortality from cardiac disease and stroke has decreased during the past 2 decades, whereas deaths from diabetes-related complications and Alzheimer disease are increasing.
- The aging of the population will have wide-ranging implications for the health care system.

## INTRODUCTION

As noted by the Population Reference Bureau, "The U.S. is getting bigger, older, and more diverse." Since 1950, the United States has been in the midst of a profound demographic change: the rapid aging of the population. The baby boom generation began turning 65 in 2011 and is now driving growth at the older ages of the population.[1] This report highlights geriatric demographic changes and illustrates how these and future trends will have wide-ranging implications for the US health care system.

## DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

### *Baby Boom Generation*

In the post–World War II era, Americans started families at younger ages and in greater percentages than during the Great Depression. Between 1946 and 1964, this resulted

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in a surge in births and increased family sizes.[2] In 2000, the US population was typical of one experiencing slow growth. The population has been aging as life expectancy has increased markedly.[2] The number of persons aged 65 years and older reached 35.1 million in 2000, representing 12.4% of the US population, an increase from 8.1% in 1950. By 2050, the older population will reach 20.2%, around 88.5 million. In other words, 1 in 5 persons in 2050 will be aged 65 years or older.

Fig. 1 illustrates the importance of the baby boom generation in shaping the overall population demographics. In 2010, the baby boom generation was 46 to 64 years old. The 2010 population pyramid for the age groups near 20 years is a result of children born to baby boomers. All of the baby boomers will have moved into the ranks of the older population by 2030, resulting in a shift in the age structure, from 13% of the population aged 65 years and older in 2010 to 19% in 2030. Even after the youngest of the baby boom population have passed away, aging will continue to be one of the most important defining characteristics of the US population, reflecting continuing low fertility and improving survival in the United States.[1]

### *Age Composition*

Half of women and almost three-fifths of men in the United States aged 65 years and older are in the 65- to 74-year age group, and one-third of both men and women are aged 75 to 84 years, whereas only one-tenth of men and one-sixth of women are aged 85 years or older. Between 2009 and 2030, this age distribution of the older population will remain mostly unchanged; however, by 2050 significant changes are expected: the distribution of men and women who are aged 85 years and older—the oldest-old—will increase substantially, whereas the shares of both men and women in the youngest age group will decline. Almost one-quarter of all women and one-fifth of all men aged 65 years and older will be in the oldest-old group. Given that the oldest-old have the highest rates of disability and institutionalization, this demographic shift will place significant strains on the state and federal budgets.[3]

### *Gender Changes*

In the future, women will continue to constitute most of the older population, because women live longer than men in the United States; however, the difference between male and female life expectancy at birth has been decreasing. In 1979, this difference peaked at 7.8 years and decreased to 5.0 years in 2008. As people age, this gap shrinks, with men having a life expectancy of 17.0 years at age 65 years, whereas women's life expectancy at age 65 years is 19.7 years—a gap of less than 3 years. This gap decreases to only 1 year by age of 85.[3]

### *Ethnic Changes*

In addition to disparities between men and women regarding aging, disparities exist between blacks and whites. White men in the United States on average have a life expectancy of 29 years and white women of 33 years at age 50 years.[4] Older black men and women, however, may not expect to live as long at the age of 50, with life expectancies of 25 and 30 years, respectively. Since the 1970s, the black/white gap in male life expectancy at age 50 years has remained longer than it was since 1930, but signs indicate that this gap is starting to narrow again.[5] The current racial gap in life expectancy at older ages for men may largely be attributed to trends in heart disease among men in the 60 years and older age group. From the 1970s through the 1990s, blacks experienced a slower decline in mortality from heart disease than whites. Recent evidence from analysis of the black/white life expectancy gap suggests a decline in