

AGING TODAY

VOL. XXX, No. 6

PAGE 1

November–December 2009

ISSN: 1043-1284

www.agingtoday.org

What Are the Benefits of an Aging Society?

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A society experiencing the demographic process of “population aging” is an aging society—one with an increase in the proportion of the old and a decrease in the relative proportion of the young.

Though most of the world’s nations (including less developed countries) are experiencing population aging, it is most advanced in the industrialized countries of Western Europe, North America and Japan.

Currently, the United States is showing a population increase due to increased fertility and immigration. But because the baby boomers are aging, the proportion of the U.S. population over age 65 will rise from about 13% to nearly 20%. Thus, America is experiencing population aging along with other advanced industrialized countries.

FEAR OF AN AGING SOCIETY

There are fears about population aging. Many people believe that an aging society costs too much in terms of health and welfare expenditures, that it is less productive, is less creative and is likely to see slower economic growth. These fears must be addressed in factual terms.

Cost is often understood framed as the so-called dependency ratio, or transfer payments from workers to non-workers. Yet the cost of pensions, public or private, varies dramatically if people work longer, which now is occurring. The agenda of “productive aging” suggests that an older population would actually offer benefits if work life extension could be combined with retraining, lifelong learning and better use of accumulated human capital.

Economists remind us that rates of economic productivity depend much more on capital investment (including human capital) and technology than other factors. There is a stereotype that links creativity exclusively with youth. But research by the late Gene Cohen in his book, *The Mature Mind*, has cast doubt on such linkage. The topic is debated in the gerontological literature, which documents that cognitive deficits come with advancing age. The benefits of life experience have been far less studied.

Rates of economic growth depend upon a variety of factors, including capital investment, trade, savings rates, technology and diffusion of innovation. Population aging, by itself, need not mean slower economic growth. This demographic is likely to promote a shift of economic resources toward the “silver industries”—businesses and services, such as healthcare, financial services, retirement housing and travel and hospitality, that grow faster when there is an increased older population.

LITTLE TO FEAR, MUCH TO GAIN

The costs of an aging society are not invariant or something to be feared. In his book, *The*

Longevity Revolution, Robert Butler points to the positive economic impact of longevity, especially if longer life is linked to greater health, as evidenced in recent decades.

Longer life can present longer periods of dependency, but it has also meant longer periods of potentially healthy, active and productive life. This potential for productive aging will only be fulfilled if society can work to reduce age-discrimination, extend work life and invest in its human capital.

The benefits of an aging society tend to be discussed in terms of healthcare and work life. Other factors are typically overlooked, such as volunteerism, family caregiving and civic engagement—dimensions of human exchange not captured by monetized exchange in the marketplace. Later life can also be a time for gerotranscendence and for cultivating values, such as generativity and wisdom, overlooked by modern societies.

These benefits *are* overlooked: They are not measured or documented and little research is done to link potential benefits to policy goals. For example, church attendance, volunteerism and engagement in the arts are sometimes justified because they contribute, allegedly, to better health outcomes. Such claims are debatable, but even if true, achieving better health is not why individuals support religion, volunteerism or the arts. As Einstein said, “Not everything that counts can be counted.”

There is also the problem of introducing what Marx called the “cash nexus” into family life. One example of this is families who pay their family members for caregiving services. Whatever the values are that govern this circumstance, we need to avoid making money the measure of all value.

Our society’s preoccupation with productivity may cause us to ignore the benefit of having more leisure time during retirement. Though it is often true that retired peoples’ use of leisure time is poorly organized (the biggest use of free time among retired people is watching TV, which is associated with poor health and isolation), imagine an aging society where the benefits of leisure are much greater.

Modern societies overvalue activity as opposed to contemplation or detachment, as Lars Tornstam has argued in his idea of gerotranscendence. But contemporary gerontology tends to hold such disengagement in disfavor. Religion and spirituality can help us to think more critically about what makes us human and what gives life its meaning.

ENVIRONMENTAL, GLOBAL IMPACTS

There are benefits associated with population aging that pertain to our global environment. There is evidence that older people may be less interested in consumerism as a way of life. Environmentalists could celebrate an aging population for its receptivity to “green” purchasing goals.

When we step back and think about aging along with the challenges facing the global environment (especially climate change) it becomes clear that all of our environmental problems would be easier to address if the world population numbered 3 billion versus 7 billion people. Population aging and population shrinkage offer us a path toward reducing the environmental impact of the human species on the entire planet. Greater longevity is not an environmental threat because we do not reasonably expect billions of people to be centenarians.

We can reasonably expect societies where smaller numbers of children are cared for with greater attention and investment in human capital, reinforced by expectation of longer lives and longer payback of investments in childhood and youth. This approach is consistent with a life course perspective in thinking about human aging.

An environmentally sustainable world is a world where population aging is matched by cultivation of the benefits of an aging society. Marc Freedman, president of San Francisco-based Civic Ventures, eloquently agrees, describing an older population as “our only indefinitely renewable natural resource.”

Population aging is not a threat, but an opportunity. This optimistic view can help us: It can give us the strength, as individuals and members of the human species, to make the necessary changes in order to seize that opportunity. History is not fixed and the choice is ours. ❖

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