

# AGING TODAY

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## WILL BOOMER GENERATION REINVENT AGING?

*[Aging boomers] have the potential to become a social resource of unprecedented proportions by contributing to the civic life of their communities. This possibility offers a way to reframe public discussion about the implications of the aging baby boom, shifting the focus from frailty and dependency long associated with old age to an image of active, productive aging that comes with improved health and longevity. Seen in this light, the generation that has challenged social conventions throughout earlier stages of life now stands poised to redefine life's later stages and possibly transform the nation in the process.*

This hopeful statement is at the heart of a recent report titled *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement*, from the Harvard School of Public Health and MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement. The book-length study observes that boomers, despite the activism of the 1960s, are less engaged than their parents' generation by every measure: "They vote less, read newspapers less and are less apt to join churches or civic organizations."

Unlike the facile condemnations of boomers as a selfish generation that are increasingly seen in media reports, the authors of *Reinventing Aging* note the greater ethnic, racial and socioeconomic diversity of boomers compared with the more homogeneous Greatest Generation. The authors emphasize that, rather than indicating passivity and indifference, boomer experience simply does not reflect the classic indicators of civic and social engagement. Compared with their forebears, the report says, boomers have been exposed to a new technological world, a broader array of ideas and lifestyles than was available in the past, and social and political trends that valued nonconformity.

The central question posed by *Reinventing Aging* is, What can be done to reach across the social spectrum in the United States to help aging boomers "envision a life that achieves meaning by connecting in new ways to the community around them?" Although both research and social trends show that many boomers will continue employment past the normal retirement age, large numbers of elder boomers might also contribute to their communities through volunteer programs.

According to the report, though, American society "does not yet know how to engage 77 million people in rebuilding social capital over a 15-year or 20-year span of later adulthood." The report notes, "Existing voluntary or charitable institutions may need to be revamped to absorb boomer volunteers and take account of their interests and preferences." Because local agencies do not have the resources for professional volunteer management, they might have to turn to new outside programs for help with recruitment, training and referral of potential skilled volunteers.

*Reinventing Aging* stresses, "a range of opportunities is needed to allow people to engage in different ways at different times and at different levels of commitment. The baby boomers soon will have the opportunity to redefine the meaning and purpose of the older years. As some of the demands of work and family that have commanded their attention in midlife recede, boomers will have the potential to become a social resource of unprecedented proportions by actively participating in the life of their communities." ❖

*Reinventing Aging* is available online at [www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc).