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Aging in New York State: Opportunities and Challenges*

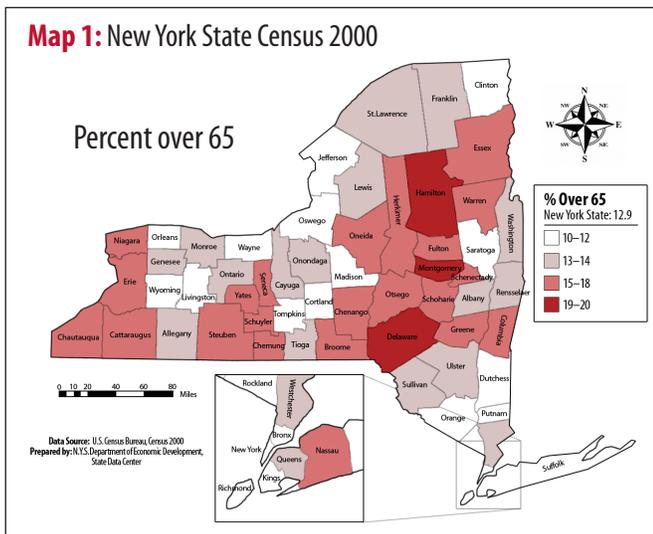
by **Nina Glasgow** and **Robin M. Blakely**, Cornell University

What is the Issue?

New York State is third in the nation in the number of adults over the age of 60, with a population of almost 3.5 million. The aging of the baby boom generation is fueling dramatic population changes, presenting a host of challenges to communities, government agencies providing health, housing and senior services, as well as non-profit and private organizations working with older adults. Public discourse often focuses on aging as a “pensions and care issue” and as a “problem.” An aging population, however, also presents opportunities.

Trends and Projections

In 2000, similar to the U.S. as a whole, 13.1 percent of New York State’s population was age 65 or older. Map 1 provides a look at how the aging population was distributed across NYS in 2000. The proportion elderly is projected to climb to 20 percent or more by 2030, increasing from 3.2 million to over 5.3 million individuals (NYS Office for the Aging, 2007). During the same time period, the state’s population age 85 and older is projected to increase by 76 percent, from about 315,000 to 556,000 persons.



By 2015, only 8 of New York State’s 62 counties will have less than 20% of their population in the 60 and older age group (see Table 1). The number of counties with 20-24% of its population age 60 and older will increase from 13 in 2000 to 35 in 2015. The number of counties with 25-29% of its population age 60 and older is expected to increase from 1 in 2000 to 17 by 2015.

Characteristics of New York’s Aging Population

While older persons comprise an increasingly larger share of the total population, they differ significantly on many important demographic

Table 1: Proportion of Population Aged 60 and Over, 2000 and 2015, New York State’s 62 Counties.

Proportion of County Population Aged 60+	# of Counties with Specified % of Elderly Persons 2000	# of Counties with Specified % of Elderly Persons 2015
12% - 19%	48	8
20% - 24%	13	35
25% - 29%	1	17
30% or more	0	2

Source: New York State Office for the Aging. (2007). “Demographic Characteristics of New Yorkers,” Table 2, Proportion of Population Aged 60 and Over, 2000 and 2015. 2007-2011 State Plan on Aging. Albany, NY: New York State Office for the Aging. Data Source: NY State Data Center, Empire State Development, 2002.

characteristics (see Table 2). Women are a high proportion of the older population (59% compared to 52% of the total population), which is noteworthy because older women have fewer financial resources, greater life expectancy and are more likely to live alone compared with older men. The older population is less racially and ethnically diverse than the total population, with 79% of those aged 65 and older being white (reporting one race) compared to 66.5% for the general NYS population. Hispanics are significantly underrepresented among the state’s elderly (8.7% compared to 16.2% of the state’s total population). While older New Yorkers are as likely to be married as the general population, they are less likely to live in family households. They are more likely to live alone, in large part due to the high rates of widowhood among older people. Older New Yorkers are also more likely to be disabled than the state’s total population. Because older New Yorkers are more likely to have grown up when average educational attainment levels were lower, they are more likely to have dropped out of high school or attained just a high school degree than today’s general population, and they are less likely to have attended or graduated from college. The vast majority of people aged 65 and older in NYS are not in the labor force, but, among those who are, the unemployment rate is extremely low.

State and Community Responses to Population Aging

New York’s older population is not only becoming larger, but healthier. Medical advances in the 20th century led to tremendous gains in life expectancy, as well as improvements in the overall health, well-being, and mobility of the older population. This challenges stereotypes about the limits of chronological age and represents significant challenges and opportunities for New York State.

While the majority of older people do retire from their work careers, a more mature workforce is anticipated in the future. Gendell (2006) demonstrated a recent increase in the proportion of older people remaining in the workforce. Upstate New York has experienced a decline in the proportion of the population in the traditional labor force age range (18-65) and so having seniors who are able and willing to remain in the workforce may benefit upstate economic development efforts. The NYS Office for the Aging has established a

Table 2: Selected Characteristics of New York State's Total and Elderly Population: American Community Survey, Averaged for 2005-2007

	NYS Total	Age 65+
Population #s	19,280,753	2,527,954
Age 65+ % of total	---	13.1
Sex and Age		
Male	48.5%	40.7%
Female	51.5%	59.3%
Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin		
One race	98.3%	99.3%
White	66.5%	79.0%
Black	15.6%	11.5%
Other	16.1%	8.8%
Two or more races	1.7%	0.7%
Hispanic or Latino Origin (of any race)	16.2%	8.7%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	60.3%	74.9%
Household Type		
Family households	64.7%	49.6%
Nonfamily households	35.3%	50.4%
Householder living alone	29.4%	48.0%
Marital Status (population 15 years and older)		
Now married, except separated	46.2%	48.1%
Widowed	6.8%	32.8%
Divorced or separated	11.4%	10.9%
Never married	35.7%	8.1%
Disability Status (with any)		
14.1%	39.0%	
Educational Attainment (population 25 years and older)		
Less than high school graduate	16.1%	28.2%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	29.6%	36.0%
Some college or associate's degree	23.1%	15.8%
Bachelor's degree or higher	31.2%	20.1%
Employment Status (civilian population 16 years & older)		
In labor force	62.6%	14.2%
Employed	58.4%	13.6%
Unemployed	4.2%	0.6%
Not in labor force	37.4%	85.8%

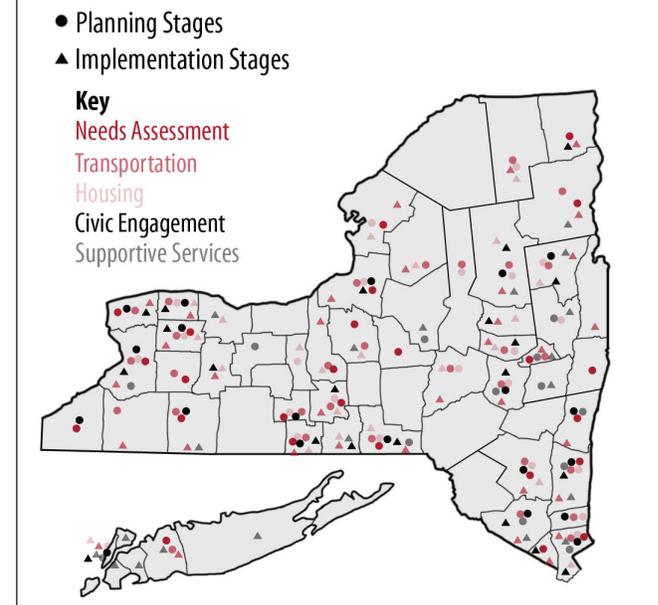
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2007 American Community Survey

Mature Worker Task Force to address older worker issues. With the country in a severe recession, however, it may be harder for older workers to retain jobs or to find new jobs. Additionally, individuals working past conventional retirement age may reduce younger workers' ability to find gainful employment.

Another consequence of an aging population is increased demand for particular kinds of community, health and long-term care services for the aging. In September 2007, Ithaca College's Gerontology Institute hosted a "Rural Aging Summit" that focused on the particular challenges facing rural older people across New York State (see <http://www.ithaca.edu/aging/ruralsummit/> for the final report). Rural areas have higher rates of income insecurity and poverty among older people, and inadequate housing options for older people. Moreover, a lack of rural public transportation limits access to services, and the range of health, medical and long-term care options is insufficient.

The NYS Office for the Aging is conducting an "Empowering Communities for Successful Aging" project to help local communities be more responsive to the needs of their aging citizens and to help communities recognize how older citizens might contribute to community development. (<http://www.empoweringnycommunities.org/index.html>). The project's initiatives include civic engagement of retired individuals who can contribute their expertise to helping community organizations, as well as providing positive cognitive, emotional and physical benefits to the individuals themselves. Another of the Empowering Communities important initiatives is the identification and implementation of best practices for elder housing and community support services. This will facilitate older New Yorkers aging in place in their own homes as long as possible without having to move to institutional settings. Map 2 shows the locations of planned and implemented community initiatives across

NYS that will address the housing, transportation, and service needs of the aging population. As shown in this map, many highly rural parts of the state lack these programs. For example, Delaware County, with almost 19% of its population over age 65, lacks all of these important initiatives.

Map 2: NYS Office for the Aging, Empowering Communities for Successful Aging, 2008.

Source: NYS Office for the Aging <http://www.aging.ny.gov/GetInvolved/EmpoweringCommunities/ComboMap.cfm>

Conclusion

The New York State Office for the Aging (NYSOFA) has been forward thinking in planning for the aging of baby boomers, and it is the lead agency in an aging services network that includes county offices for the aging, the NYS Department of Health and a number of other agencies and organizations. The following are program areas prioritized by NYSOFA and other groups in the aging services network as important to meeting the needs of an increasingly aged population.

- Home and community-based long-term care
- Family caregiver support
- Health promotion/wellness/healthy aging
- Outreach services for an increasingly diverse older population
- Consumer education and protection
- Empower older persons through civic engagement and volunteerism
- Mental health, substance abuse, dementia and adult protective services advocacy
- Improve infrastructure – housing and transportation

An aging population brings both challenges and opportunities. The above set of program priorities reflects both. Planning for an aging population should include all areas of the state, upstate and downstate, urban and rural. The "rural blanks" in Map2 need to be filled. ▲

*David L. Brown serves as guest editor on this issue.

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