

Projections of the Older Population: An Examination of the U.S. Census Bureau's Projections Over Time

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Population aging is one of the most important demographic dynamics affecting families and societies throughout the world. The growth of the population aged 65 and over is affecting many aspects of society and challenging policymakers, families, businesses, and health care providers, among others, to meet the needs of aging individuals. Information on the number of older people and their proportional share of the total population help guide policy makers and planners.

The older population of the United States grew rapidly over the 20th century. In 1900, people aged 65 and older numbered 3.1 million. In 2003, nearly 36 million people aged 65 and over lived in the United States accounting for just over 12 percent of the total population. According to Census Bureau projections, a massive increase in the number of older people will occur during the 2010 to 2030 period, when the Baby-Boom generation (people born between 1946 and 1964) begins to turn 65 in 2011. The older population is projected to double from 36 million in 2003 to 72 million in 2030, and to increase from 12 percent to 20 percent of the population. By 2050, the older population is projected to number 87 million.

Projections of the older population have changed over time as assumptions about future trends in fertility, mortality, and migration have changed. This paper examines several different sets of projections of the 65 and over population and the 85 and over population done at the U.S. Census Bureau. We compare the 2004 set of projections with past projections from 1967, 1975, 1984, 1989, 1993, and 2000. We examine how these projections have changed over time and compare past projections with actual population numbers. We specifically look at assumptions about mortality and compare those assumptions to the observed mortality levels. In addition, we compare past projections with current projections of the 65 and over population and the 85 and over population for future years: 2025 and 2050. We examine the changes in assumptions about fertility, mortality, and migration that account for this change.