

The Graying of America

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Americans are getting older. On the individual level, of course, the melancholy fact that every day each of us is another day older is a truism. But demographers, with a mounting urgency, have been calling attention to the aging of our society more generally. Since the turn of the century, there has been an eightfold increase in the number of Americans over the age of 65, and almost a tripling of their proportion in the population. Those over the age of 85 — the fastest-growing group in the country — are 21 times as numerous as in 1900.

This dramatic change in the age structure of the United States is straightforwardly explained by two interacting social and medical developments. First, there has been a decrease in the number of children, accelerating precipitously in recent years as the last of the baby boomers moved into adulthood: from 1960 to 1982 the number of children younger than 15 fell by 7 percent. Second, with improved medical care and sharply declining death rates for the elderly, there has been an even more rapid increase in the number of senior citizens: between 1960 and 1980 the number of people 65 or older grew by 54 percent. America's elderly are now facing a population explosion, demographers warn, greater than that of the population of India.

The graying of America has consequences that ramify throughout our society. McDonalds ads portray perky oldsters slinging hamburgers, while Alzheimer's support groups multiply to help families cope with one of the tragedies plaguing the aged. But perhaps nowhere is the demographic shift more evident than