

Graying of rural America has policy implications

July 4 2013, by Marijo Wright Dowd

More than 16.5 percent of rural Americans are age 65 or older, a higher proportion than in other parts of the country, so any changes to government services will have a greater affect on people who live in rural areas, reported a Cornell researcher June 20 at a congressional briefing.

The briefing, Aging in Rural America: 21st Century Trends, at which this and other findings were presented, was prompted by the publication of the book, "Rural Aging in 21st Century America" (Springer, 2013), edited by Nina Glasgow, senior research associate in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell, with E. Helen Berry of Utah State University.

The U.S. population is rapidly aging, Glasgow said. More than 40 million Americans in 2012 were 65 or older, and the number is expected to jump to more than 70 million by 2030 when the last of the Baby Boomers reaches age 65. That represents an increase from 13 percent to 20 percent of the population as a whole. Glasgow said "rural aging presents not just challenges but also opportunities, because many older people are active volunteers and social entrepreneurs, and often continue working after age 65, especially on a part-time basis."

Other speakers included Douglas T. Gurak, professor of development sociology at Cornell, speaking on elderly immigrants in rural America; Joachim Singelmann, professor of public policy and chair of the [demography](#) department, University of Texas at San Antonio, addressing

the health of African-Americans in nonmetropolitan areas; and Kenneth M. Johnson, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, speaking on rural retirement migration and "natural decrease," referring to more deaths than births.

Among the findings presented:

- More than 10 percent of Americans over age 60 relocated, mostly to rural "retirement destinations," which are scattered widely across the U.S. but are most numerous in the South and West.
- People ages 75 and older are the fastest-growing segment of the [elderly population](#). Rural areas have a higher proportion of this age group, who are more likely to have chronic diseases and disabilities.
- For the first time, two states, West Virginia and Maine, recorded more deaths than births. In fact, last year, 24 percent of all U.S. counties experienced "natural decrease," and 85 percent of those counties were rural.
- The life expectancy for U.S. women is 80.5 years, 75.5 years for men. Both rural and urban elderly are more female than male, and because women's wages remain lower than men's, women receive less in Social Security and pension benefits. Rural residents receive lower Social Security and pension benefits than urban residents, and being an older rural female compounds the problem.
- Immigration from abroad is increasing the ethnic diversity of the rural elderly population, especially with those of Latin American and Asian origins.
- Except for older Mexican origin immigrants, elderly immigrants living in [rural areas](#) have relatively high incomes.
- Older African-Americans have higher disability rates than their white counterparts, especially older rural African-Americans.

The event was organized by the Consortium of Social Science Associations, Glasgow and Berry. Briefing co-sponsors included the Cornell Agricultural Experiment Station, Cornell Population Center, Cornell's Department of Development Sociology, among other groups.

Provided by Cornell University

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