

# How can cities adapt to the needs of their aging populations?

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Long before COVID-19 had us rethinking just about every aspect of how we live, demographers and experts on aging were already considering what the future will look like for the world's cities.

A decade from now, roughly three of every five people on the planet will live in cities, and that population is getting older than the urban dwellers of the past. On top of that, aging populations will double between now and the end of the century.

Add lower birth rates and longer lives to the mix, and it's undeniable: Cities are fundamentally changing.

"Population aging will literally change everything," said Paul Irving, distinguished scholar in residence at the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology. "And cities are the first line in a rapidly changing country."

In response to this demographic shift, [city](#) leaders have begun to reconsider the fundamentals. And USC researchers are at the forefront of studying this shift, with a deep well of knowledge in planning, demographics and gerontology.

## **Urban housing, transportation must evolve for older adults**

One big area that cities have to face is housing. Research shows that a significant majority of adults want to age in place, but most homes aren't ready for the reality of older residents, Irving said. Only a tiny percentage of U.S. homes include the basic access for people with limited mobility—features like single-floor living with no steps and extra-wide doors and ramps to accommodate wheelchairs.

"Relatively small inexpensive changes can make a huge difference—lever-style doors, curbless showers with handheld shower nozzles," Irvine said. As chairman of the Milken Institute's Center for the Future of Aging, he recently co-authored a report on "Age-Forward Cities for 2030."

The number of baby boomers living across Southern California is huge, says Caroline Cicero, associate professor of gerontology at the USC Leonard Davis School and director of the USC Age-Friendly University Initiative.

"There is an assumption that older people are going to move out and move into retirement communities," she said. "But most people want to stay in their own houses." That means that houses have to adapt to the needs of older residents—and could mean more multi-generational housing, where [older adults](#) live with younger people.

Another housing problem is the cost: People who have been lifelong renters don't have a nest egg to fall back on in order to move, Cicero said.

"They have few choices if they lose their affordable housing," she said. That has a knock-on effect because people aren't willing to move out of their homes if they don't have other assets, essentially freezing them in place. The number of low-income senior rental buildings is declining in Southern California, and the Los Angeles Aging Advocacy Coalition estimated that 200,000 older adults were at risk of falling into homelessness—even before the pandemic.

Cities have to think about new models for transporting seniors, too. Many places have embraced ride-hailing apps like Uber and Lyft, allowing older adults to give up their keys and still get around in places that don't have particularly robust public transit.

But that requires older people to use technology and also to be willing to hop in the back of a stranger's car—both of which may take some training.

## **Aging adults need places in cities to work, communicate**

As people live longer, they also need ways to engage and connect with their communities, building links between generations to reduce the

chances of isolation and loneliness. Workforces depend on older workers, yet nearly two-thirds of U.S. workers say they have seen or personally faced discrimination based on age. But older adults make significant contributions to workforces, especially when they combine their knowledge with that of younger people.

"Intergenerational workforces combine the risk-taking and imagination of younger people with older cross-sector problem solving," Irving said. "Employers who can capitalize on both are employers that will be more successful in years to come because intergenerational teams outperform others."

Communities of faith can play a role in bringing seniors into contact with younger people, Cicero added.

"Churches and other faith communities are supposed to serve people of all ages without an age limit," she said. Intergenerational programming can help: Older people are a big asset to young families. "They're not in competition," she said.

What's good for older adults is good for communities in general

Higher education institutions also have an opportunity to open their arms to a diverse student body—including many older learners.

"Universities and colleges have an incredibly important role to play—with the change in the way people work, the need to enable and encourage lifelong learning has never been more important," Irving said. Whether it's learning new skills online or on campus, more than ever, people of all ages need to apply new proficiencies.

"Schools should not just be the provenance of the young. Education is something that is enjoyed across life, and people should be encouraged

to learn across life," he added.

For major institutions, that represents a new way to think about the education force and workforce of the 21st century.

"It's happened with women, people of color, the LGBTQ communities and others—campuses look different today compared with 30 years ago, and that diversity is powerful and exciting," Irving said. "The next step in that process is including age in the diversity matrix."

Irving added that there is opportunity in longer lives but society will need to question its own practices to keep up with the change.

"At a high level, much like climate change, population aging will change everything: lives, families, institutions, companies, health and cultural institutions," he said. "We have a world with norms and practices that are derived from times when lives were much shorter, and we have to change some of those assumptions."

But in the end, things that are good for seniors—walkable cities, good transit, the opportunity to work and connect—are also good for [younger people](#).

"These things are sometimes framed as things that are only good for older people," he said, "but they are common sense for everyone."

**More information:** Servat et al., Age-forward cities for 2030. (2020). [milkeninstitute.org/reports/age-forward-cities-2030](https://milkeninstitute.org/reports/age-forward-cities-2030)

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