

# Study identifies countries and states with greatest age biases

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Two studies from Michigan State University pinpoint where in the world you'll find the most age bias, and where the "golden years" are considered truly golden. Credit: Creative Commons via PxHere

Elders are more respected in Japan and China and not so much in more individualistic nations like the United States and Germany, say Michigan State University researchers who conclude in a pair of studies that age bias varies among countries and even states.

"Older adults are one of the only stigmatized groups that we all become

part of some day. And that's always struck me as interesting—that we would treat so poorly a group of people that we're destined to become someday," said William Chopik, assistant professor of psychology and author of the studies. "Making more equitable environments for older adults are even in younger people's self-interests."

While aging is looked at as something that's inevitable and a part of everyone's life, it's viewed very differently around the world and in [different environments](#)—which could be detrimental for people's health and well-being.

For both studies, Chopik and colleagues gauged public sentiment and biases toward aging by administering the Implicit Association Test—which measures the strength of a person's subconscious associations—on over 800,000 total participants in each study from the Project Implicit database.

The first study examined which countries around the world showed the greatest implicit [bias](#) against older adults. Published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, the study is the largest study of its kind and was co-authored by Lindsay Ackerman, a post-Baccalaureate researcher in MSU's psychology department.

"In some countries and cultures, older adults fair better, so a natural question we had was whether the people living in different countries might think about older adults and aging differently. And, maybe that explains why societies are so different in the structures put in place to support older adults," Chopik said.

Collectivistic countries like Japan, China, Korea, India and Brazil—which tend to focus on group cohesion and harmony—had much less of a bias toward older people than individualistic countries. Individualistic countries like United States, Germany, Ireland, South

Africa and Australia tend to stress independence and forging one's own identity. In addition to having greater age biases, the findings also revealed that individualistic countries are more focused on maintaining active, youthful appearances.

"Countries that showed high bias also showed an interesting effect when you asked people how old they felt. In ageist cultures, people tended to report feeling particularly younger than their actual age," Chopik said. "We interpreted this as something called age-group dissociation—or, feeling motivated to distance yourself from that group. People do this is by identifying with younger age groups, lying about their age and even saying that they feel quantitatively younger than they actually are."

The second study honed in on individual states across the U.S. to see which demonstrated the most age bias, as well as how this bias was associated health outcomes. As the first and only study of its kind, the findings were published in *European Journal of Social Psychology* and the paper was co-authored by Hannah L. Giasson, a post-doctoral scholar from Stanford University.

The states with the highest age bias were mostly in the Southern and the Northeastern U.S. Additionally, many of most-biased states tended to have the worst outcomes and life expectancies for older adults.

"We found a strange pattern in which some popular retirement destinations tended to be higher in age bias, like Florida and the Carolinas," Chopik said. "Possibly, this could be due to the friction that occurs when there are large influxes and migrations of older adults to regions that are not always best suited to welcome them."

Additionally, states with higher age bias also tended to have higher Medicare costs, lower community engagement and less access to care. Chopik explained that one reason for the added health expenditures is

because older adults with more illnesses cause a higher demand for health resources. The other reason is that those states might be worse at managing and administering support and funds for older adults. States—and how they treat older adults—likely affect how easily people can acquire these funds and services, he said.

"Both of our studies demonstrate how local environments affect people's attitudes and the lives of older adults. We grow up in our environments and they shape us in pretty important ways and in ways we don't even realize," Chopik said. "Being exposed to policies and attitudes at a country level can shape how you interact with older adults. At the state level in the United States, how you treat older adults has important implications for them—for example, their health and how long older people live—and even the economy, like how much money we spend on [older adults](#)' health care."

**More information:** Hannah L. Giasson et al, Geographic patterns of implicit age bias and associations with state-level health outcomes across the United States, *European Journal of Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2707](#)

Provided by Michigan State University

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