

More Americans support government assistance for care of older adults

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Prior to the pandemic, the majority of American adults thought that families should be responsible for the daily care of older adults—and that families should cover the cost of this care.

But there is a small sea change in that way of thinking, says a University of Michigan researcher.

U-M demographer and sociologist Sarah Patterson, along with Adriana Reyes of Cornell University, used data from the [General Social Survey](#) to determine how Americans' attitudes toward elder care have changed over time. The data was drawn from about 2,400 survey respondents aged 18 and older.

The paper is [published](#) in the journal *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*.

They found that by 2022, more Americans felt [government agencies](#) should be providing help in caring for older adults—both financially and in providing support for daily tasks such as grocery shopping or laundry.

In 2012, 61% of Americans believed that families should provide care for older [family members](#). By 2022, only 48% of Americans felt this way. Over the same time, Americans' support for government assistance nearly doubled, from 13% to 25%.

The large, aging American population may be bringing this conversation to the forefront of people's minds. But another event may also have contributed to a change in attitude: the COVID-19 pandemic, Patterson said.

People were suddenly faced with not only taking care of their children, but also potentially a parent who may have moved into the household temporarily or needed help in other ways due to being in a high-risk category for COVID-19, she said.

"We were curious about how Americans' attitudes have been changing considering the pandemic. During the pandemic, a lot of stories came

out about the reality of elder care for [adult children](#) and other family members," said Patterson, a research investigator at the Survey Research Center and an affiliate at the Population Studies Center, both at the U-M Institute for Social Research.

"Child care receives a lot of attention, but elder care is more hidden. I think that plays out in people's attitudes. They think, "Now that I've seen what this means for me, I may need more help."

Americans' attitudes toward who should pay for elder care have also changed. In 2012, 37% of Americans thought the government should pay. By 2022, 51% felt this way. In 2012, 44% believed older adults or their family should pay for care; by 2022, this number had fallen to 28%.

Patterson points out that these attitudes differ by age. Working-age adults increased their support for government over family payment as well as [government support](#) for daily care. Older adults increased their support for both, but not as significantly as working-age adults. These trends in increasing support for government aid mirror other attitude surveys like the [Long-Term Care Poll](#) that show support for more government responsibility for [older adults'](#) health care.

"We wondered whether the growing population of aging adults was changing people's attitudes toward elder care, but it's really hard to tease this apart from the impact of the pandemic," Patterson said. "The reality of the difficulty of elder care became front and center for family members taking care of an older adult during the [pandemic](#)."

More information: Sarah E. Patterson et al, Changes in Americans' Views on Who Should Provide and Pay for Assistance to Older Adults with Activity Limitations, 2012 to 2022, *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/23780231231225574](https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231231225574)

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