



America in 2050: Even older and more diverse

Fifth of population to be over 65, Census says; whites no longer majority

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WASHINGTON - Significant population shifts mean the United States at midcentury will be both older and more diverse, promising fundamental changes in American cultural and economic institutions.

The projections on aging, part of a report issued Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau, will have dramatic ramifications for Social Security and health care programs.

Minorities, now about a third of the population, are expected to become the majority in 2042 and hit 54 percent in 2050. Hispanics, who make up about 15 percent of the population today, will account for 30 percent in 2050, according to the projections.

Meanwhile, everyone in the enormous baby boom generation of the mid-20th century will be 65 or older by 2030. That is the year the Census Bureau projects that senior citizens will make up 1 in 5 U.S. residents. By 2050, the elderly will make up a full quarter of all Americans, most of them white.

"The white population is older and very much centered around the aging baby boomers who are well past their high fertility years," said William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, a Washington public policy institute.

While non-Hispanics make up about two-thirds of the population today, they are only 55 percent of those younger than 5, thanks to a booming birthrate among minority residents, especially Hispanics. As a result, minorities will comprise more than half of all children by as early as 2023, the Census Bureau said, rising to 62 percent by 2050.

Funding for elderly to be squeezed

Graphic representations of growth rates in the population in 42 years resemble the figure 8, with large balloons at the top (those older than 65) and at the bottom (those under 35). Those in the middle — the so-called working ages of 18 to 64 — are projected to decline from 63 percent of the population today to 57 percent in 2050.

The Social Security Administration said that while the program for now is taking in more money than it pays out, the balance will tip in 2017, when payouts will exceed collections and it will have to begin dipping into its trust funds to pay benefits.

Because better health care means people are living longer and longer, the imbalance will accelerate, with ever-older Americans drawing ever-higher benefits financed by an ever-smaller pool of working taxpayers, the American Academy of Actuaries projected. By 2041, the Social Security trust fund would be exhausted unless the current system is changed significantly.

The actuaries group, which advises policymakers on risk and financial security issues, has called on the White House and lawmakers to consider raising the retirement age, which currently ranges from 65 to 67 years old.

"You just can't have people living longer and longer and longer and have the program with a frozen normal retirement age of 67. It just doesn't make sense," Bruce Schobel, chairman of an academy task force on retirement security principles, said in a separate report this month.

"Eventually, people will have a larger and larger proportion of their lives spent in retirement, until you reach the point where we just can't afford it," he said.

Funding for health care for extremely old Americans will likely become a critical issue. Those ages 85 and older are already the fastest-growing single segment of the population, and their numbers are expected to

triple by 2050, to more than 19 million.

The Institute of Medicine, an arm of the National Academies of Science, warns that the nation's health care workforce is unprepared to meet the needs of the aging population.

"The sheer number of older patients in the coming years will require trying new models for delivering health care and the commitment of greater financial resources," said John Rowe, a professor at Columbia University and chairman of the committee that issued the institute's report in May.

Most minority categories to grow

Overall, the U.S. population is projected to grow by 43 percent by midcentury, from 305 million people today to 439 million in 2050.

Hispanics represent the largest increase among ethnicities, projected to double to nearly a third of all Americans. But other racial and ethnic groups will also grow while non-Hispanics decline:

- The black population is projected to increase from 41.1 million, or 14 percent of the population, to 65.7 million, or 15 percent.
- The Asian population is projected to climb from 15.5 million to 40.6 million. Its share of the nation's population is expected to nearly double, from 5.1 percent to 9.2 percent.
- American Indians and Alaska Natives are projected to rise from 1.6 percent to 2 percent.
- The number of people who identify themselves as being of two or more races is projected to more than triple, from 5.2 million to 16.2 million.

The projections are based on rates for births, deaths and immigration and are subject to major, depending on immigration policy, cultural changes and natural or manmade disasters, the Census Bureau said.

By Alex Johnson of msnbc.com. The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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