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CROSS-CULTURAL

## 50 Our Aging World

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*The average age in societies around the world is rising. Even now, demographers report, the eighty-and-over age group is the fastest-growing portion of the elderly population. Frank B. Hobbs and Bonnie L. Damon describe the growing number of elderly persons worldwide, compare the growth of the elderly population in developed and developing countries, and raise important questions about the future implications of our aging world.*

### POPULATION AGING IS WORLDWIDE

To set the aging of the United States in context it is useful to look at aging in the rest of the world. Fertility rates and infant and maternal mortality have declined in most nations. Also, mortality from infectious and parasitic diseases has declined. The world's nations generally have improved other aspects of health and education. All of these factors have interacted so that every major region in the world shows an increased proportion of the population that will be sixty-five or older by 2020.

There were 357 million persons aged sixty-five and over in the world in 1994 [see Table 1]. They represent 6 percent of the world's population. By the year 2000, there would be about 418 million elderly. The annual growth rate for the elderly was

2.8 percent in 1993–94 (compared with an average annual rate for the total world population of 1.6 percent). Such growth is expected to continue far into the twenty-first century.

Numerical growth of the elderly population is worldwide. It is occurring in both developed and developing countries. The average annual growth rate in 1993–94 of persons sixty-five years and over was 3.2 percent in developing countries compared with 2.3 percent in the developed world. In absolute numbers, from 1993 to 1994, the net balance of the world's elderly population (sixty-five years and over) increased by over 1,000 persons every hour. Of this increase, 63 percent occurred in developing countries.

Over half (55 percent) of the world's elderly lived in developing nations in 1994. These developing regions could be home to nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of the world's elderly by the year 2020. Thirty nations had elderly populations of at least 2 million in 1994. . . . Current population projections indicate there will be fifty-five such nations by 2020.

*Source:* From *65+ in the United States*. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Special Studies, P23–190 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996), pp. 24–27.

Among countries with more than 1 million population, Sweden has the highest proportion of people aged sixty-five and over, with 18 percent in 1994—about the same as the state of Florida. Sweden also has the highest proportion aged eighty and over with 5 percent. The Caribbean is the oldest of the major developing regions with 7 percent of its population sixty-five or older in 1994.

By 2020, the elderly will constitute from one-fifth to nearly one-fourth of the population of many European countries. For example, Census Bureau projections indicate that 23 percent of Germany’s population would be elderly compared with 22 percent for Italy, Finland, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, and Greece. The elderly population of twelve additional European countries with more than 1 million population will constitute at least one-fifth of the total country population. The United States would be 16 percent.

Japan’s population age sixty-five and over is expected to grow dramatically in the coming decades. According to projections, the percentage of Japan’s population that is elderly could grow from 14 percent (17.1 million) in 1994 to 17 percent (21.0 million) in 2000 and to 26 percent (32.2 million) by 2020. . . . This is a rapid rise in a short time. Japan’s population eighty years and over also is projected to grow very rapidly, from 3 percent of their total population in 1994 to 7 percent by 2020.

Already the Japanese are reducing retirement benefits and making other adjustments to prepare for the economic and social results of a rapidly aging society.

In 1994, the world had an estimated 61 million persons aged eighty or older. That number is expected to increase to 146 million by the year 2020. Persons eighty years and over constituted only 1 percent of the world’s total population in 1994 and more than 20 percent of the world’s elderly (28 percent in developed countries, 16 percent in developing nations).

### DEVELOPED COUNTRIES NOW HAVE MOST OF THE WORLD’S OLDEST POPULATION

Although the developed countries of the world represented only 22 percent of the total world population in 1994, the majority of the world’s population aged eighty and over live in developed countries. However, it is projected that by 2020, the majority will live in developing countries. For many nations, the eighty-and-over age group will be the fastest growing portion of the elderly population. In 2000, 26 percent of the elderly in the United States would be eighty or older, which, among countries with a population size of at least 5 million, would rank sixth, behind Sweden,

TABLE 1 World Population by Age and Sex, 1994 and 2000

Year and Age	Population (millions)			Percentage of Total			Males per 100 Females
	Both Sexes	Male	Female	Both Sexes	Male	Female	
<b>1994</b>							
All ages . . . . .	5,640	2,841	2,798	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	101.5
Under 15 years. . .	1,790	917	873	31.7	32.3	31.2	105.1
15 to 64 years . . .	3,492	1,771	1,722	61.9	62.3	61.5	102.9
65 years and over.	357	153	204	6.3	5.4	7.3	75.2
<b>2000</b>							
All ages . . . . .	6,161	3,103	3,057	100.0	100.0	100.0	101.5
Under 15 years. . .	1,877	962	915	30.5	31.0	29.9	105.2
15 to 64 years . . .	3,866	1,959	1,907	62.7	63.1	62.4	102.8
65 years and over.	418	182	236	6.8	5.9	7.7	77.1

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Data Base.

TABLE 2 Projected Population for Countries with More than One Million Persons Aged 80 Years and Over, 1994 and 2020

Country/Area	Rank		Population Aged 80 Years and Over (in thousands, based on rank in 1994)	
	1994	2020	1994	2020
China, Mainland . . . . .	1	1	9,010	28,737
<b>United States</b> . . . . .	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7,760</b>	<b>13,007</b>
India . . . . .	3	3	4,021	12,639
Japan . . . . .	4	4	3,597	9,362
Russia . . . . .	5	5	3,317	7,191
Germany . . . . .	6	6	3,313	5,889
France . . . . .	7	8	2,563	3,754
United Kingdom . . . . .	8	9	2,342	3,400
Italy . . . . .	9	7	2,221	4,142
Ukraine . . . . .	10	12	1,421	2,923
Spain . . . . .	11	13	1,287	2,488
Brazil . . . . .	*	10	*	3,132
Indonesia . . . . .	*	11	*	3,034
Mexico . . . . .	*	14	*	2,296
Poland . . . . .	*	15	*	1,877
Turkey . . . . .	*	16	*	1,751
Canada . . . . .	*	17	*	1,595
Thailand . . . . .	*	18	*	1,477
Pakistan . . . . .	*	19	*	1,385
Romania . . . . .	*	20	*	1,264
South Korea . . . . .	*	21	*	1,221
Vietnam . . . . .	*	22	*	1,199
Argentina . . . . .	*	23	*	1,072
Iran . . . . .	*	24	*	1,039

\* Indicates population 80 years and over in 1994 was less than 1 million.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Data Base.

Denmark, Switzerland, Cuba, and the United Kingdom.

In 1994, China had the largest number of persons aged eighty or older followed by the United States [see Table 2]. Nine additional countries had over 1 million persons eighty years and over in 1994. By 2020, this list is expected to include thirteen additional countries, ten of which are developing countries. In many developing countries, the population eighty and over in 2020 is likely to at least quadruple from 1994. This highlights the problems governments may have in planning supportive services for this burgeoning population group.

The rapid growth of the oldest old has various health and economic implications for individuals, families, and governments throughout the world. The oldest old often have severe chronic health problems which demand special attention. The

nature and duration of their illnesses are likely to produce a substantial need for prolonged care. Developing nations already have diluted resources. They are the most limited in being able to provide preventive measures and, in future years, supportive services. The United States and other countries face enormous investments and payments to maintain current levels of services for the oldest old.

### CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the reasons for the growth of aging populations worldwide?
2. In the 1990s, the majority of the world's population aged eighty and over lived in developed countries. How is this expected to change by 2020? As the average length of life continues to increase

in both developed and developing countries, who, if anyone, is responsible for improving the quality of extended life?

3. Hobbs and Damon observe that “The United States and other countries face enormous investments and payments to maintain current levels of

services for the old.” What, specifically, are examples of such investments and payments? Who will pay for the necessary services for elderly populations—individuals? families? government? corporations? people in the labor force? others?