

(A list of the delegates of this section is available in the Press Room)

CONFERENCE ON AGING

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Digest of Proceedings

Section Ib

Population Changes and

Economic Implications

Morning session, Aug. 15

Approved by Dr. Philip M. Hauser, Chairman

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

At the fourth and final session of Section Ib, of which Dr. Philip Hauser was chairman, the group discussed and adopted the following summary statement on population changes and economic implications in relation to the problem of aging.

There are over 11½ million people, or 7½% of the total population, in the United States today 65 years of age and over. Their number has quadrupled during the last half century while the entire population has only doubled. In 1900 there was 3 million persons 65 and over, making up about 4% of all our people. By 1975 we will have about 20 million persons in this class.

The aging of our population poses many social and economic problems. Among the most important is that of assuring older people the means for attaining a satisfying life. Only 25% of our people 65 and over are employed -- 43% of the men and 9% of the women.

Older people also have family responsibilities. Two-thirds of the men over 65 are married. Approximately 10 percent have children under 18. Two-thirds of the women are single, widowed, or divorced.

Most of the older persons not at work are not voluntarily idle. Loss of employment creates psychological and social as well as economic problems. For at least half a century the proportion of men who continue to work after they reach old age has been rapidly decreasing - chiefly because of technological change, occupational shifts, compulsory retirement provisions, discriminatory practices and concepts among employers, and other factors which make it increasingly difficult for them to keep a foothold in the labor market. Meanwhile, the years of our life have been lengthened, so that an ever increasing proportion of men's lifetimes is spent in retirement.

There are a number of practical ways to reduce the burden of old age dependency or to make it more manageable. There is virtually unanimous agreement that the best possible solution of the problem of supporting the older person -- from a psychological, social and economic standpoint -- lies in enabling him to continue to do productive work in accordance with his capacity.

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To this end

- (a) Increased attention needs to be given to the prevention and treatment of degenerative and debilitating diseases and the provision of facilities therefor,
- (b) Chronological age limits for employment should be abandoned or at least greatly advanced,
- (c) Immediate research and action are needed to discover and provide employment opportunities for the capacities of the aging.

Not all of the older people, any more than any other group in our population, can be employed at all times. Timely support during periods of inability to work must be provided by private or public means. Private savings have limitations but are necessary in our present society. We have now recognized the need also for public pensions. These institutions are imperfect in many respects and require many improvements. Among these are recognition that the basic needs arise because of disability rather than chronological age.

In the present critical international situation, particularly, the United States cannot afford to waste the productive potentialities of its older citizens. In this potential lies a considerable part of the solution of our problem of manpower shortage arising out of efforts to assure national defense while maintaining our high standard of living.

The declining birth rate over the past century is the main reason for the increasing percentage of older people. The declining death rate among younger people has also contributed to the result. The remarkably high birth rates in the war and postwar period are believed to be temporary and are not expected to reverse the long-term trend of aging.

Concentration of the aged varies among the states and population groups. In 1948 the number of persons 65 and over ranged from 5 per 100 in New Mexico to 10 per 100 in New Hampshire. Because of higher mortality rates, the proportion of aged in the Negro population is lower than that in the white. The same is true of lower as compared with higher income groups. For the underprivileged parts of our population, including our non-whites, we may look forward to adding years to life as well as life to years. At present, the average life expectancy of non-whites at birth is 60 years as contrasted with 68 for whites.

The problems which arise from the aging of our population will not solve themselves. Fortunately, there are a number of forces inherent in the development of our society and our economic organization that will help us to solve them. Continuing increases in national productivity will help us to support the nonproductive population, although an increasing number of older persons need not necessarily mean an increasing dependency load. Above all, provision of decent living for older people and effective adjustment of our society to the needs of an aging population depend upon sustained full use of our material and human resources.

More research is needed to show what types of occupations and industries can most effectively utilize the skills and abilities of older persons. Within broad occupational and industrial groups we need to know a great deal more about the specific requirements of individual jobs in relation to the capabilities of older workers. We need to know more exactly what their capacities are, in terms of skills, aptitudes, and physical and mental abilities. Research is needed on the possibilities of part-time employment for those who cannot work full time, and on the effects of the rigidity of the existing wage structure as a factor tending to limit employment of the aged. Additional knowledge is needed also on the implications of the aging of our population for other aspects of our social and economic life. For example, we need to know more about the influence of aging on productivity, income and markets, savings, housing, medicine and health, and national defense.

There is unanimous agreement on the necessity of anticipating the problems of aging and on making provisions in advance to meet them. There is agreement that the problems of aging must be looked at from a national and regional as well as a local point of view. They require public as well as private attention and individual as well as social initiative.

The present large and prospective increasing proportion of older persons in our population is a recent product of modern civilization. Significant changes in our basic approach to the problem of aging are called for on many fronts: in our thinking, our institutions, and the use of our resources, national and local, individual and social. The constructive efforts which the United States has made in the conservation of its natural resources should now be paralleled by a similar constructive attack aimed at the conservation of our human resources, of which the aged are a significant component.