

"The Ecology of the Aged"

by

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The United States as an organized society stands committed to the values of longevity--a long life and plenty of it. Since we have been able to implement these values--and our demographic situation is favorable--we would expect to find aged people everywhere. An analysis of the ecology of our old people accordingly must be devoted to the explanation of differentials: that is, the question is why larger proportions of aged people are found in certain areas and types of communities? Two answers are possible. The aged will be found in greater proportions in (1) areas to which they have migrated and in (2) areas in which larger proportions of the mature population have remained to grow old together. The whole content of this paper will of necessity be devoted to the interplay of these two themes.

I

Retirement from the labor market might well be accepted as the crucial act in determining the ecology of our aged population. Here possibly for the first time in their mature lives, individuals find themselves in the position where the place they reside is not determined by the requirements of the job. From now on they can be oriented to their own needs as consumers rather than to the demands the economy has placed upon them as producers. This is a situation which cuts both ways. If ever they wanted leisure to spend, they have it now. If ever they lacked money with which to spend leisure, it is probable they will lack it now.

Our first effort accordingly is to answer the question: what effect does retirement have upon the location of old people? If we had asked this question of an older generation we might have received in answer the refrain of a sad, old song: "Over the hills to the poor house." If we had looked for stereotypes in the roaring twenties, we would have been told that "the retired farmers of Iowa are going to California to spend their declining days in the sunshine." If there is a rationale connecting retirement with location, it behooves us to examine it.

No doubt when old people retire some will follow the impulse to go "where the livin' is easy," in Porgy's immortal song. These are the ones we should expect to find in certain California communities and in St. Petersburg, Florida. Such special communities are worthy of detailed study in the ecology of the aged. Those who retire to these sunshine cities are also the ones we may expect to find in the well-known higher income brackets and among those whose employers have set up fairly generous pension schemes. What we have come to here is the hypothesis that migration of the aged is a function of economic position with the suggestion that the most likely migrants at older ages will be those with retirement incomes.

There is another approach to the set of hypotheses which seem to be emerging from our statement of the problem: old people may have to move, if they lack means to support themselves as independent households in the locality of current residence. Here we would expect the aged, especially women over 65, to go where relatives are located. Since these relatives are usually their children, we would expect this stream of migration to follow the paths followed by the mature population twenty to forty years ago. We also have some reason to expect single oldsters to be more important than couples in this movement. If their children have not migrated, neither will this group of old people.

To develop an ecology of old people it is necessary then that we know something about their retirement status and their family characteristics.

Examination of labor force data indicates that at age 60 years about four-fifths of the men in 1940 were still in the labor force of the nation. From age 65 to 74 almost half the men were still in the labor force. After 75 the proportion dwindled to less than one in five. A decade ago it seems that old men were more likely to stay at home with a job than to retire. If they migrated it would be as a member of the labor force. Aged women in the labor force, on the other hand, never rose higher than 13.6 per cent for those aged 60 to 64 years. It fell to 2 per cent for those 75 and over. Rural-farm males continued longer in the labor force, rural-nonfarm males dropped out sooner.

We may secure a partial answer to this question: "Where do the old folks live?" by an examination of the statistics on marital status and family composition. They indicate in 1940 that 68.8 per cent of those 65 and over lived in their own households; 16.4 per cent in households with sons or daughters; 10 per cent with other relatives or as lodgers; 2.5 per cent in institutions and 1.6 per cent with other relatives or as lodgers; 2.5 per cent in quasi-households, apartment hotels, boarding homes and the like. Men tend to live in their own houses more than women, 75.5 per cent compared to 62.5 per cent. Women more often lived with sons or daughters, 22.2 per cent to 10.4 per cent. Older males maintain their own households longer if they live on farms (78.6 per cent); women, in rural-nonfarm areas 68.8 per cent. Larger proportions of older women (27.0 per cent) also live with their children on farms. From such facts Marion B. Smith drew the following conclusions: (1) a large part of the aged men in 1940 were living in their own homes with their wives, and were wholly or in part self-supporting through their labor. (2) A large portion of the elderly women were not living in their own domiciles but in establishments with their sons or daughters and they received their support wholly or in part from their offspring or from the state in the form of old age relief.

Moreover there are more older women than men and a higher proportion are widowed. In the middle classes and above consistent efforts are made to leave "an estate" or insurance for the widowed. Therefore we have every right to assume in 1940 that the impact of older men on the ecology of the aged was in terms of orientation to the productive economy while that of women was in terms of "retirement" in quotes, and affected for many by the decision to reside with their children. We would thus have to assume that older women are more migratory than men. No assumption about aged couples is justified from these data

II

In our search for hypotheses about the ecology of the aged, we must focus our range finder on areas as well as on families. In terms of our theoretical model, we have said that two areas should emerge: areas to which the aged go and areas in which the aged are left. Where then do the oldsters stay and where do they go? On farms, in villages, or in the cities? On the West Coast, in New England, Florida and California, or the Middle West? Where do older men predominate and in what type of communities and areas is the excess of older women to be found?

In twenty years from 1930 to 1950 the sex ratio of all the elders fell from 101.3 men per 100 women to 86.4. There are now 900,000 more women than men over 65. In urban territory older women exceed older men by more than a million, in rural-nonfarm territory by 80,000. The account is balanced on farms where there is a surplus of 209,000 men among the older group. In every census period older women were found more often in urban and less often in rural farm areas. Aged men as would be expected, show greater predominance in rural farm territory. Analysis by five year age groups in 1950 shows that on farms older men come to exceed older women around age 55. In other residence groups women invariably predominate in all ages over fifty except for age 60-64. This offers some indication that our surplus of aged women may be transferred from the 60-64 year old group.

More and more the population old and young has shifted from countryside to city. From 1910 to 1950 the change went on with the aged showing consistent partiality only for the rural-nonfarm residence. Of the people over 65 in 1940, well over half (56.2 per cent) were found in urban places, 21.8 per cent in rural-nonfarm territory, and 22.0 per cent on farms. This followed very closely the distribution of the total population, with the aged found to be over-represented only in rural-nonfarm territory. Preliminary sample figures from the 1950 Census show large decreases in farm residence with over-representation of the aged in both urban and rural-nonfarm territory.

Our 12,321,000 old people in 1950 were divided among the country's major regions with a majority in the northern regions: 28.2 per cent in the North East, 33.1 per cent in the North Central states and the minority in the South, 25.9 per cent and West, 12.8 per cent. Highest proportions of the population are aged in the North Central States, 9.2 per cent, and the Northeast, 8.8 per cent. The Southwest has only 6.8 per cent 65 and over. Only 5.8 per cent of the South's Negro population are 65 and over.

By region the residence of old people tends to follow that of the total population with exceptions. In 1940 only two of the nine Census divisions conformed to the United States pattern--relatively most persons 65 years old and over in the rural-nonfarm population and least in the rural farm. By 1950 only the South out of four main regions failed to follow the national pattern. Here rural-farm residence was preferred to rural-nonfarm residence. In the North Central States, however, elders disproportionately prefer rural-nonfarm communities; in the West they avoid farms and seek the cities to a greater extent than do the total population.

The picture can be narrowed to the state level only for 1940. Examination of the extremes shows that New Hampshire then had the highest proportion of its

residents aged 65 and over, 9.7 per cent, and the highest proportion on rural farms, 13.2 per cent. Minnesota and Iowa were both high, 9.8 and 8.9 per cents, but Iowa was the most unusual in having 13.3 per cent of its rural-nonfarm people over 65. Colorado had the highest proportion of elders in its urban areas, 9.6 per cent. South Carolina and New Mexico had the least, 4.2 and 4.4 per cent. Neither Florida nor California were unusual.

While the internal structure of the city has not been adequately studied from this point of view, we would expect to find old people in settled residential areas 30 and 40 years old and other older areas not invaded by industry and business. Following McKenzie's model, James A. Quinn in his Cincinnati studies found elders in goodly proportions in (1) an old residential area which had not deteriorated greatly, (2) in an old village encompassed by the city, (3) around the central business district (men) and (4) in certain apartment hotels. Calvin F. Schmid found that in large cities older people show a tendency to live in the higher income areas, T. Lynn Smith presents data showing that the village rural-nonfarm populations have a higher proportions of aged than the suburban rural-nonfarm peoples, the latter being in general a later settlement. Many institutions for the care of the aged are located in the open country and this fact may increase the importance of rural-nonfarm residence for this group.

In any model pattern of population dispersal which we are able to visualize, the present location of people over 65 reflects of necessity the concentration and dispersal of the mature population of some 30-40 years ago. This consideration led us to expect large proportions of the aged in areas of economic maturity. These we can assume will be Eastern and Midwestern rather than Pacific states. They will show a preponderance of old people in rural rather than in urban areas. That this ecological pattern will be pronounced when accompanied by out-migration of youth is shown by the age and residence patterns of New England. It is not found

in the South, another area of large out-migration. Here high fertility has operated as a counteracting force.

III

As usual, the sixty-four dollar question is not asked until the last: What is the probability that the aged will migrate? Have their movements served to set up the predominance of older people in certain regions?

Studies of the main streams of in-migration -- those to the Pacific coast, to the industrial Northeast and to Florida, from 1910 to 1950 -- show these areas had net gains of both aged and young migrants. The pattern of aged migration follows that of the nation, but the stream is proportionately less than that of the younger population.

Studies of the population movements for the period 1935-40 by Warren S. Thompson show that migration was less significant in accounting for the location of people over 55 than for the total population. An unpublished study of migration in Tennessee, for the same period, by James J. Maslowski, confirms this conclusion. In no case did the proportions of migrants 65 years old and over equal the percentage of migrants from the total population. In no sub-region and no city did those aged 65 and over equal as large a proportion among the total migrants as they did in the total population. In the main, rural areas had proportionately more old people, and the immigrant rates of old people were usually higher than out-migration rates for the metropolitan counties the oldsters consistently showed higher out-migration rates.

Accordingly we come back to the basic explanations which account for the ecology of the aged. A high proportion of aged in the population may be due to (1) a high rate of in-migration of old persons. This is the most reasonable of all the assumptions, but it proves on examination to be the least important. A predominance of elders may be due to (2) the aging of a mature population of a

generation ago. If accompanied by little in-migration and a declining birth rate, this is shown to have a most important effect. Finally, it may be increased by (3) a high rate of out-migration of young persons from the area. A high proportion of oldsters in a rural-area will probably represent both processes, that is, the economic maturation of an area with accompanying loss of the younger people. That outward migration does not of itself furnish this pattern is shown by the case of the South. Finally the point to be made about important areas of in-migration is that they attract young populations in even greater proportions than they attract oldsters.

By this time we are prepared to say that the probability that the aged will not migrate is very large. Warren Thompson has shown that only 3.9 per cent of all 1935-40 migrants were 65 and over. All persons of this age, however, composed 6.8 per cent of the total population. One reason why non-migrants constitute so great a proportion of those above 65 is that it includes the large numbers who do not retire at this definite age break. This large group who are not ready to go to lands of sunshine and are not forced to seek shelter with their children undoubtedly offers the main key to the ecology of the aged. Those who do not retire by glancing at the calendar are likely to be found among the owners of small business, operators of small farms, small proprietors and many professional men. It also includes the large number of wage earners who stay on after 65. For this group, Jacob Fisher points out:

...economic motive, while of diminished significance among the aged, does not cease to operate at age 65. After all, six out of ten men between the ages of 65 and 70 were still in the labor force in 1940; some of them are no doubt attracted to the same States that annually draw millions of young people. Part of the answer then is that the economic considerations influencing younger migrants also affect some of the aged.

The net conclusion of this analysis is to diminish greatly the importance of migration in determining the ecology of old people. Oldsters migrate in proportionately smaller numbers than the total population. Moreover, the areas

like California and Florida which have proved attractive to old people are even more attractive to mature and young populations. On every statistical exhibit accordingly these areas turn out to have small proportions of the aged in their populations than long settled areas like rural New England and the Middle West. In rural areas we expect to find more oldsters in settled farming areas where the general patterns of agriculture have not changed much in recent years.

Thus, it can be shown that an ecological patterning of the aged would be established if old people did not migrate at all. This pattern is a projection of the mature population of 20-30 years before. This pattern will be further accentuated if there is a migration of youth from these mature areas.

The evidence would suggest that new patterns of the ecology of the aged had not been worked out a decade ago and 1940 is not the best guide to their future distribution. The full effect of Old-Age and Survivor Insurance on retirement had not been felt, by that time. Even the 1950 census has not come at a time to measure the effect of pension and retirement schemes now being put into effect by major corporations.

Retirement has not yet become a definite break with the previous life and location of older people. In the main, our elders go on living in their familiar haunts; when they do move in numbers they follow the paths of the total population to such an extent that they do not appear as an outstanding segment in the new region. In fact, we may say that our movements of youth may be more important in giving areas a predominance of old people than movements of the aged. The maximum effect of the migration of oldsters is to be found in those specialized communities which like St. Petersburg, Florida, cater to their needs.

IV

Our last consideration will serve to relate our topic to the realm of public policy. Here the importance of the ecology of the aged has been sought in terms

of the unequal burden of dependent populations on states and communities. Calculated in terms of the ratio of producing and consuming units in the population, it can be shown that regions with predominantly young populations carry the greater dependency burden.

This contradicts the dramatic emphasis given the unequal tax burdens of old age. States with mild climates are thought to pay for their good fortune by having to support an excess of the nation's elders. Moreover, states have hesitated to adopt liberal old age measures for fear of the torrents of senescence they would attract from their more niggardly neighbors.

In a survey of the field, Jacob Fisher found that:

States with an in-migration of aged persons tend to have fewer aged old-age and survivors insurance beneficiaries than might be expected from the number of aged insured workers, and States with an out-migration to have more beneficiaries. These relationships reflect differences in employment opportunities for the aged in covered industry. In-migrant states tend to be high-income. States and to have relatively more covered employment than out-migrant States. In such States the benefit has relatively less attraction than in out-migrant low-income agricultural States, the volume of retirement is relatively lower, and the "deficit" of beneficiaries therefore is relatively larger.

Oklahoma offers a good example of the impact of ecology on policy in the field of old age assistance. Throughout the 1930's, Oklahoma had the largest proportions of its people on old age relief of any state. Sometimes explained by lax standards, this phenomenon was closely geared to the trends we have just been discussing. Oklahoma was settled by a land rush just before its admission as a state in 1909. The large cohort of "Boomers" and "Sooners" who sought security in homesteading were of the same general age composition. They came thirty years later to demand the security of relief, a security which many failed to find in the rush for free land. Similarly, the importance of the Okies who trokked Westward in the 1930's will again be apparent when they reappear among the aging cohorts who should make California a predominant home of old people less than a generation hence. For this prediction to be realized there is one proviso -- migration to California must slacken.

Special communities of old people need not wait a generation to develop problems of policy. Any city which becomes a resort for the retirement of the aged faces definite hazards. The local community lacks the broad basis of tax support enjoyed by state and nation. By attracting aged residents it decreases its normal demographic basis of a supporting, productive population. To carry the services needed by these old people, such communities are dependent for proportionate support on the properties and retirement incomes of the aged. How taxable and how stable are these sources of support? This question will become increasingly important to every sunshine city which has attracted large proportions of elders. Here the ecology of the aged already has meaning for public policy.