Across the United States, both the elder population—those older than 64—and the younger population—those younger than 20—will grow over the next 15 years. The growth of the elder population is ubiquitous, and the growth of the younger population is more geographically variable. In this brief, we consider the implications of this growth for generational balance across the United States, using an average scenario from our projections. In the decades to come, states and local areas with growing populations will need to invest resources in a young population growing apace and an elder population growing faster than the overall population. Other states and local areas with stagnant overall populations will find themselves with fewer working-age people to support both the young and the rapidly growing elder population.

This brief is one of a series that demonstrates the potential for policy and social investigation using the “Mapping America’s Futures: Population” tool. In this brief, we examine how changes in the age structure of the population will affect future patterns of generational balance across geographic regions of the United States. Other briefs in the series examine projections for overall population growth (“Scenarios for Regional Growth from 2010 to 2030”), for changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the population (“Evolving Patterns in Diversity”), and for changes in America’s labor markets (“The Labor Force in an Aging and Growing America”). The online tool allows the viewer to see the implications of different assumptions about future fertility, mortality, and migration, all of which are explained in “Methodology and Assumptions for the Mapping America’s Futures Project.” Our population projections are divided geographically across 740 commuting zones of the United States.
We also combined commuting zones into 24 regions with boundaries built from reviews of literature and observed differences in recent patterns of population change.

**Growth by Age**

The set of projections that this brief is based on indicates that, in the next 15 years, both the absolute number of elders and their proportion of the population will rise substantially. The elder population is increasing everywhere, but the increase is lowest in the Great Plains and the Rio Grande Valley regions. It is highest in the Southwest Triangle, Central Florida, I-81 Corridor, Northeast Corridor, Pacific, and Texas Triangle regions. Several, but not all, of these are the areas of highest growth overall.

As discussed in “The future of America’s young population,“ the absolute number of young people will also grow over the next 15 years, but this increase is not spread as evenly across the country as the increase in the elders. In the Great Lakes, Northeast Corridor, Northern New England, and the Gulf Coast we project the youth population to decline. In the Cascadia, Central Florida, Southwest Triangle, I-81 Corridor, and Texas Triangle regions the youth population will increase.

Anticipating the size of both these populations is important if we are to marshal the resources to ensure that both the elderly have adequate resources and young people are properly equipped to one day take their place as productive, working-age adults.

**Generational Balance**

A standard way to measure the size of the elder and youth population is relative to the size of the working-age population between 20 and 64. We compute the ratio of the population older than 64 to the population between 20 and 64, terming this the elder ratio. Similarly, we can compute the ratio of the population younger than 20 to the population between 20 and 64, terming this the child ratio. The idea behind these measures is that people between the ages of 20 and 64 are working and producing to care for and invest in the other age groups. Demographers often refer to these ratios as “dependency” ratios, which has the unfortunate connotation that working-age people experience their parents and children primarily as burdens. Despite this semantic difficulty, the sum of these two ratios provides an excellent and simple measure of generational balance. The way the measure is usually expressed is the number of either young or elder people per 100 working-age people. So a child ratio of 20 means that there are 20 young people for every 100 working-age people. Another way to think about this is to say that an elder ratio of 20 means that for every elder in a population there are five working-age adults.

In figures 1 and 2, we show the child and elder ratios as of the 2010 Census. These maps show that, for most of the United States, the child ratio was high in absolute terms—at least 30 everywhere—as well as higher than the elder ratio in most commuting zones. According to our average scenario, the child ratio will rise in some places, decline in some, and remain the same in others, as is shown in figure 3 where we map the projected child ratio for 2030. The elder ratio, by contrast, is increasing—quite dramatically—in nearly all areas of the United States by 2030 (see figure 4).
FIGURE 3
2030 Child Ratio

FIGURE 4
2030 Elder Ratio
A comparison of figures 3 and 4 shows that, despite the dramatic projected increase in the elder ratio in the average scenario, the projected child ratio remains the same or higher than the elder ratio in many parts of the United States. This means that, while most commuting zones will face an increase in the demand for services to the elderly, there will be little decline in the demand for services to children and youth, particularly in the eastern and midwestern United States.

Of course, if the recent decline in birth rates continues and the long-term decline in death rates slows, the future will be somewhat different. Under that future scenario, more parts of the country have equal child and elder ratios, and the child ratio exceeds the elder in fewer places. Even under this other scenario, however, child ratios remain substantial over the next 15 years.

**Geographic Variation**

As figures 1–4 show, across the country, the changes in the generational balance over the next 15 years varies. The national picture is important for the elder population, for whom federal programs, like Social Security, Medicare, and the federal portion of Medicaid, provide the largest share of support. The state and local picture is important for the young population, for whom state and local programs, such as school expenditures (KidShare), provide the greatest share of support. Hence, profiles of specific commuting zones can be particularly useful in anticipating the need for future investments in the young population. In figure 5, we examine a set of projections based on the average scenario for population growth and changing age structure in four commuting zones: Atlanta, Las Vegas, Washington, DC, and Youngstown.

**FIGURE 5**

*Change in Child and Elder Ratios*  
*2010 to 2030*

![Graph showing the change in child and elder ratios from 2010 to 2030 for Atlanta, Las Vegas, Washington, DC, and Youngstown.](image)
We project the elder ratios in the four commuting zones shown in figure 5 to increase—Atlanta and DC to approximately 25, a level below the projected national average (40), Las Vegas to approximately the national average, and Youngstown to approximately 60, substantially above the national average.

Our projections for this scenario indicate that the child ratio in these four commuting zones will decline below the national average (60). In Atlanta, DC, and Las Vegas, we project child ratios of 44, 44, and 37, respectively. In Youngstown, by contrast, our projected child ratio is the same for 2030 as the actual child ratio of 2010. The decline in Atlanta, DC, and Las Vegas is because the increase in the working-age population will be greater than that for the youth population, while in Youngstown the working-age population will shrink faster than the youth population.

This scenario’s predictions show Atlanta, DC, and Las Vegas having a child ratio higher than the elder ratio in 2030, despite the fact that the former declines and the latter increases for these three commuting zones. In Youngstown, the elder ratio will be higher than the child ratio in 2030 according to these projections, but the projected child ratio in Youngstown is still moderate.

Discussion

The changing age structure of the American population described in this average scenario produces two patterns. The first pattern shows a shrinking youth population, a growing elder population, and a shrinking working-age population—a pattern that Youngstown demonstrates. This pattern probably also means a shrinking economy, so that even reduced demands for the young population will be hard to meet. The second pattern, demonstrated in Atlanta, shows projected growth in the working-age population, young population, and economy, but even faster growth in the elder population. All this growth will create new demands for resources and infrastructure.

The growth of the elder population in the coming years has been discussed extensively in the United States, but often not in light of the continuing growth—in many places—of the youth population. Moreover, in the scenario we consider here, the child ratios for 2030 are higher than the elder ratios, even in places like Atlanta, Washington, DC, and Las Vegas, where the elder ratios go up while the child ratios decline. This means that states and local areas must maintain or exceed the current levels of investment in children and youth, while also creating and maintaining supports for the elder population. In places like Youngstown, where, according to this scenario, the working-age population declines faster than either the youth or elder population, both youth and elder ratios will remain high. The challenge for local areas like Youngstown is to find a way to provide necessary supports to both the young and the old, without over-burdening their diminished working-age populations.

Notes

2. Although this is called the “child” ratio, it includes all people under age 20.
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