



Many Older Americans Engage in Caregiving Activities

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Many older Americans provide care to young children and frail adults. Although few caregivers are paid for their work, the services they provide to family members and friends are crucial. Without their help, the government would have to offer additional child care or long-term care services at taxpayer expense, those in need of care would have to purchase more paid services, or some children and people with disabilities would have to get by with less care.

This brief examines caregiving activities by adults age 55 and older. Findings are based on the 2002 Health and Retirement Study, a large, nationally representative survey of older noninstitutionalized Americans.¹ The results show that nearly 40 percent of people age 55 and older—and about half of those age 55 to 64—spent time caring for family members in 2002. On average, caregivers spent 580 hours per year helping their grandchildren, parents, in-laws, and frail spouses. Men were just as likely as women to help their families, but women devoted more time to caregiving activities.

Nearly 40 percent of older Americans provide care to family members. Older caregivers spend 580 hours a year on average helping their spouses, parents, in-laws, and grandchildren.

Importance of Care Provided by Older Adults

Many older adults care for their grandchildren. The services they provide range from looking after their grandchildren on afternoons, evenings, and weekends to serving as legal guardians and primary caregivers when parents are unable to care for their children themselves. Between 1970 and 2003, the number of children living in their grandparents' homes increased by 73 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). Nationally, about 2.4 million grandparents now live with grandchildren and are responsible for their care (Simmons and Dye 2003). About 29 percent are African American and 19 percent live in poverty.

Older Americans also often provide elder care. Most frail adults who need help with basic activities live in the community, not in nursing homes, and receive care from family members, not from paid helpers. Older adults with disabilities who receive family care are substantially less likely to later become institutionalized (Lo Sasso and Johnson 2002). Spouses account for 9 out of 10 primary caregivers of married adults with disabilities. Adult children (and children-in-law)

account for nearly 8 out of 10 primary caregivers serving unmarried older people. Just over half of the adult children who care for their frail parents are more than 50 years old (Johnson and Wiener forthcoming).

Children increasingly rely on care provided by older Americans. As women delay the age at which they start families, more young children are being raised by parents in their 50s and 60s. Between 1982 and 2002, the number of births per woman age 35 to 44 more than doubled (National Center for Health Statistics 1999, 2003). Women age 35 and older now account for nearly one in seven births nationwide.



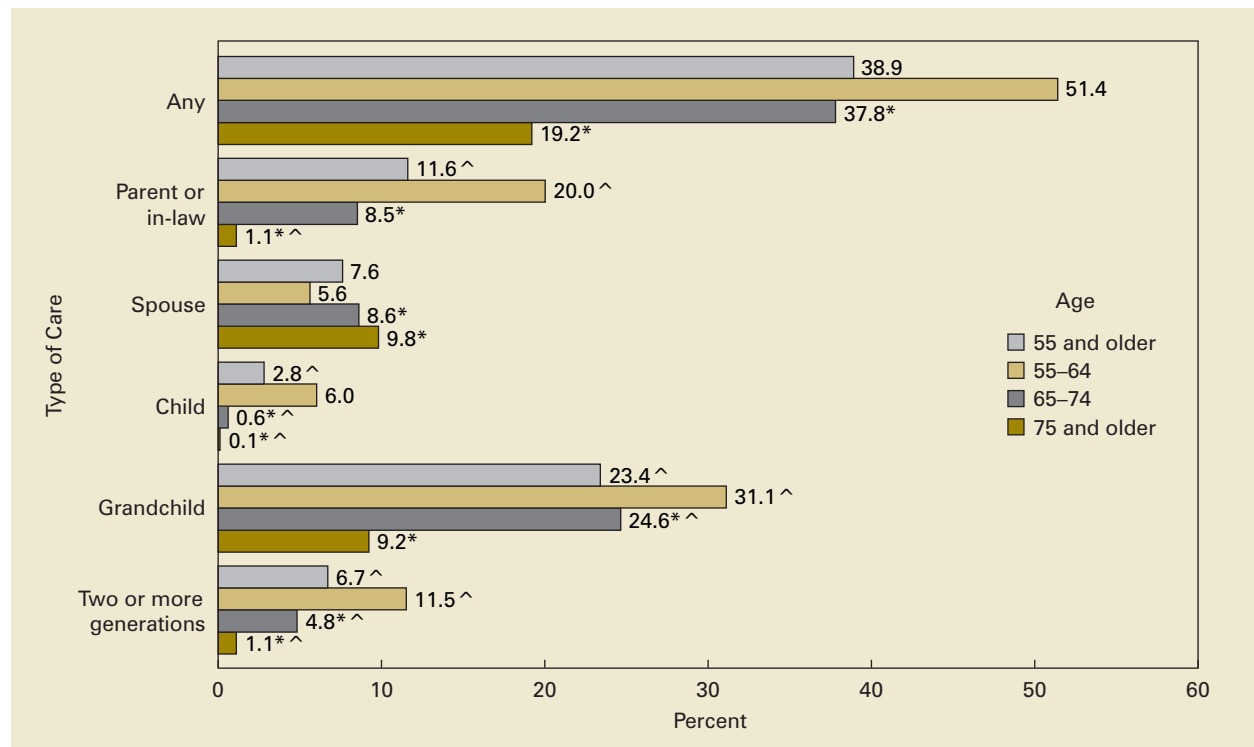
Although caregiving activities can be personally rewarding, they pose special challenges for older adults. Caregivers who are not yet retired must often struggle to balance their work demands with family responsibilities (Johnson and Lo Sasso 2000). Caring for frail spouses at older ages can be physically exhausting and emotionally draining, especially for caregivers coping with their own health problems. Grandparents raising their grandchildren can feel overwhelmed by new (and often unexpected) child care responsibilities that they thought had ended years ago. Family caregivers can also feel isolated from their friends and cheated out of the leisurely retirement they had anticipated. Many caregivers in fact report high levels of stress, depression, and physical health problems (Yee and Schulz 2000).

Share of Older Americans Providing Care

In 2002, almost 4 out of 10 adults age 55 and older cared for their own children, grandchildren, aged parents and in-laws, or frail spouses (figure 1).² Grandchild care was the most common caregiving activity, pursued by nearly one-quarter of older adults, followed by parent care, spousal care, and child care. About 7 percent of adults age 55 and older cared for multiple generations of relatives.

The share of older adults providing any type of care to family members declines with age. In 2002, 51.4 percent of adults age 55 to 64 engaged in some type of caregiving activity, compared with 37.8 percent of those age 65 to 74 and 19.2 percent of those age 75 and older. One in

FIGURE 1. Share of Older Adults Helping Relatives, by Type of Care and Age, 2002



Source: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Estimates are based on a sample of 16,811 adults age 55 and over. Grandchild and parent care refer to activities undertaken in the past two years. Spousal care refers to activities in the past month (or the last three months of life for recently deceased spouses). Adults living with their own minor children are assumed to provide child care. For grandchild and parent care, the estimates count only unmarried adults and married couples who provided at least 100 hours of care in the previous two years.

* Differs significantly ($p < .10$) from 55-64 age group within care type.

^ Differs significantly ($p < .10$) from rate of spousal care within age group.

five adults age 55 to 64 helped their parents or in-laws with basic personal care or with chores and errands, but the chance of having a surviving parent falls rapidly at older ages. Consequently, fewer than 1 in 10 adults age 65 to 74—and only about 1 in 100 adults age 75 and older—provided parent care. Similarly, 6 percent of adults age 55 to 64 spent time caring for their own children, but very few people older than 65 have children younger than 18. Nearly 12 percent of those age 55 to 64 cared for multiple generations.

Unlike parent or child care, the likelihood of providing spousal care increases with age. Nearly 10 percent of adults age 75 and older spent time caring for their frail spouses, compared with only

5.6 percent of those age 55 to 64, whose spouses were less likely to have disabilities.

Variation in Caregiving by Personal Characteristics

Older men were just as likely as older women to spend time caring for their families, challenging the conventional wisdom that family care is strictly the responsibility of women (table 1). Among those age 55 and older, 39.2 percent of men and 38.6 percent of women provided care. Compared with women, men were somewhat more likely to devote time to caregiving activities

TABLE 1. Share of Older Adults Providing Care to Relatives, by Age and Other Personal Characteristics, 2002 (percent)

	55 and older	55–64	65–74	75+
Gender				
Men	39.2	50.0	35.9*	21.7*
Women	38.6	52.7 ^	39.4* ^	17.7* ^
Race				
White	38.2	50.7	38.1*	19.3*
African American	43.4 ^	53.5	40.7*	23.5* ^
Hispanic	40.7	54.3	30.4* ^	16.6*
Health status				
Excellent/very good	42.2	51.8	40.1*	20.6*
Good	38.4 ^	51.3	38.0*	20.5*
Fair/poor	34.0 ^	50.7	33.7* ^	16.9* ^
Work				
None	33.8	51.8	37.6*	18.8*
Part-time	44.7 ^	54.0	37.9*	21.2*
Full-time	48.5 ^	50.3	37.2*	34.9* ^
Has a frail spouse				
Yes	87.3	90.0	88.9	82.8
No	37.7 ^	50.7 ^	36.5* ^	17.2* ^
Has a frail parent				
Yes	66.5	67.1	64.0	—
No	37.1 ^	49.6 ^	36.6* ^	—

Source: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Estimates are based on a sample of 16,811 adults age 55 and over. Care includes any assistance to parents, parents-in-law, spouses, grandchildren, or other children. Grandchild and parent care refer to activities undertaken in the past two years. Spousal care refers to activities in the past month (or the last three months of life for recently deceased spouses). Adults living with their own minor children are assumed to provide child care. For grandchild and parent care, the estimates count only unmarried adults and married couples who provided at least 100 hours of care in the previous two years.

— = not applicable

* Differs significantly ($p < .10$) from 55–64 age group.

^ Differs significantly ($p < 1.0$) from top row of category.

at age 75 and older, but somewhat less likely at 55 to 74.

Many older caregivers juggle work demands with family responsibilities. Among those age 55 to 64, 50.3 percent of full-time workers and 54.0 percent of part-time workers provided care to family members in 2002.

African Americans, those in excellent or very good health, and those with frail spouses or parents were especially likely to engage in caregiving activities. Nearly seven in eight adults age 55 and older with frail spouses and nearly two in three adults with frail parents served as family caregivers. Although those age 65 and older with health problems were less likely than those in better health to care for family members, health problems did not appear to impede caregiving activities at 55 to 64. Fully one-half of those in fair or poor health at age 55 to 64 served as caregivers.

Hours of Care Provided by Older Americans

Family caregivers age 55 and older spent 580 hours a year on average helping their par-

ents, in-laws, spouses, and grandchildren in 2002 (table 2).³ About two-fifths of caregiving hours went to spouses, another two-fifths went to grandchildren, and the final one-fifth went to parents and in-laws.

Female caregivers averaged 648 hours a year on caregiving activities, about 160 hours more than male caregivers. Women devoted most of these additional hours to the care of grandchildren. Male caregivers spent nearly the same amount of time on spousal care as their female counterparts.

Spousal care absorbed more than twice as much time as parent or grandchild care. Spouse helpers averaged more than 1,400 hours of family care a year, compared with 541 hours for parent caregivers and 474 hours for grandchild caregivers. Average hours of care provided by older caregivers increased with age along with the likelihood of providing spousal care. Caregivers age 75 and older provided 886 hours of care a year on average, nearly 400 hours more than caregivers age 55 to 64. About three-quarters of the care hours contributed by those age 75 and older went to helping spouses.

TABLE 2. Mean Hours of Care Provided by Caregivers Age 55 and Older to Spouses, Parents, In-Laws, and Grandchildren, 2002

	Any care	Spousal care	Parent or in-law care	Grandchild care
All	580	233	123*	224
By gender				
Men	489	236	98*	154*
Women	648 [^]	231	141* [^]	276* [^]
By type of care				
Spouse helpers	1,443	1,322	26*	95*
Parent helpers	541	36	373*	132*
Grandchild helpers	474	62	76	336*
By age				
55–64	496	98	166*	233*
65–74	612 [^]	306 [^]	84* [^]	221*
75+	886 [^]	685 [^]	14* [^]	187* [^]

Source: 2002 Health and Retirement Study.

Notes: Estimates are based on a sample of 5,644 caregivers age 55 and older. Grandchild and parent care refer to activities undertaken in the past two years. Spousal care refers to activities in the past month (or the last three months of life for recently deceased spouses). For grandchild and parent care, the estimates count only unmarried adults and married couples who provided at least 100 hours of care in the previous two years. All care hours are annualized.

* Differs significantly ($p < .10$) from spousal care hours.

[^] Differs significantly ($p < .10$) from top row of category.

Discussion

Older Americans provided substantial amounts of care to family members in 2002. About 39 percent of adults age 55 and older provided care to their parents and in-laws, frail spouses, children, and grandchildren. Older caregivers provided 580 hours of care on average to parents, in-laws, spouses, and grandchildren in 2002. Nearly one in five adults age 75 and older served as family caregivers, averaging almost 900 hours of care a year. These activities enhance the lives of millions of young children and frail adults, improve the productivity of working-age adults relieved of some of their own family responsibilities, and reduce public expenditures on child care and long-term care services.

Despite the many personal rewards, caregiving activities may impose physical and emotional hardships on older caregivers. The burdens may be especially overwhelming for caregivers with their own health problems and those caring for family members with dementia. Butrica and Schaner (2005) show in an earlier brief in this series that retirees who provide family care but are not engaged in other volunteer or work activities are much less likely than other older adults to be satisfied with their retirement.

In recognition of the burdens confronting caregivers, several public initiatives have been implemented or recently proposed to offer support. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 requires employers to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to workers who need time off to care for family members. Many states offer respite care, education, training, and other services to grandparents and family caregivers, with financial support from the federal government. Some states also offer caregivers direct financial assistance (Coleman 2000), and legislation is pending in Congress to provide federal income tax breaks to family caregivers. Given the prevalence and importance of caregiving activities by older Americans, additional efforts to support caregivers deserve consideration.

Notes

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1. The survey is conducted by the University of Michigan with primary funding from the National Institute on Aging. See <http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu>.
2. In the estimates reported in this brief, grandchild and parent care are included only if they each amount to at least 100 hours in the previous two years.
3. Time spent caring for own young children is not included here because the survey did not attempt to collect that information.

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Perspectives on Productive Aging is a series of data and policy briefs focused on engagement activities among adults age 55 and older. The series is supported through a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies as part of their Ageing Programme, which seeks "to bring about lasting improvement in the lives of older adults and to transform how ageing is viewed and older persons are treated by society."

As America ages, older adults are getting more attention. Gone (or at least fading) is the stereotype of the retiree who is unable to work and who makes relatively few social contributions. Increasingly, older Americans are seen as a vibrant group with wisdom and energy to offer society and their families. *Perspectives on Productive Aging* will enhance the dialogue on the engagement of older Americans, documenting the current value of engagement among older adults and highlighting the best ways for society and policymakers to support and encourage the full engagement of older Americans.

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