Population of older Americans tops young children for first time

Aging well is ‘a life span challenge,’ says K-State’s Yelland

MANHATTAN, Kan. – For the first time in the United States, there are more older adults than young children.

“The first of the Baby Boomers turned 65 in 2011,” said Kansas State University specialist in aging Erin Yelland. “So, the oldest of the Baby Boomers are just now turning 75, which means that this population is going to continue to rapidly grow.”

Older Americans – those age 65 and up – have topped 54 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, experiencing rapid growth over the past 10 years. The youngest age group – those age 5 and younger – has remained mostly flat in the U.S. and is estimated at just under 20 million.

Further, current projections from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that America’s older population will surpass those 18 and younger (currently at about 73 million) by the year 2035.

“There are a lot of good things that happen as a result of having an older population,” said Yelland, who recently spoke about aging well on K-State’s weekly radio show, Sound Living. “For example, the majority of wealth is held by older adults, so they have a strong influence on our economy. Older adults bring wisdom, historical perspectives and value to society. Because we are living longer, older adults are able to act as the glue to some inter-generational families. Some are even raising or providing regular care for their grandchildren. Older adults play a lot of roles in society, all of which are valued.”

“In Kansas,” she added, “we have the highest percentage in the country of older adults who volunteer. For older adults – even if they’re working part- or full-time – it’s a lot easier to find time to give back because they’re not necessarily dealing with the number of obligations they had when they were younger.”

A concern for older adults, however, is health. Medicine and other interventions “are good at keeping us alive,” Yelland said, “but not so good at keeping us healthy.”
It’s estimated that by 2050, 12.7 million Americans will suffer from Alzheimer’s dementia, Yelland said. More older adults will be living in long-term care facilities.

“We are also seeing that heart disease is the No. 1 killer among adults 65 and older, and that can be attributed to the 45% of adults who are obese, the 77% of older adults who have hypertension and the 5 million adults that live in poverty, which greatly affects our health.”

Yelland said aging well should be viewed as “a life span challenge.”

“I always say that aging isn’t flipping a switch once you turn 65,” she said. “Your ability to age well is a life span challenge, or something we should be doing throughout our lives. I tell our college students at K-State that the decisions they’re making now as 18, 19 and 20 year olds will affect their ability to age well.”

Her lessons to college students, though, sometime elicit groans from younger adults who may often think aging challenges don’t apply to them.

“But the more I talk about the issue with our students, the more they start to realize that perhaps I might be slightly correct in what I’m saying,” Yelland said. “Our younger generation often thinks they’re invincible and nothing is going to hurt them. I was the same way when I was a teenager. But it’s really important that we’re working to help people understand the importance and value of their decisions across their lifespan.”

Yelland said K-State Research and Extension agents across Kansas are working to help older adults remain independent, exercise and maintain their living spaces in ways that help them remain healthy.

A couple key resources include:

- **Simple Home Modification for Aging Place.** This publication outlines free or low-cost changes to make the home a safer place to live. Some of the modifications include removing such trip hazards as rugs; installing grab bars and sturdy handrails; moving frequently used items to lower shelves in the kitchen; and arranging furniture strategically to reduce hazards.

- **Keys to Embracing Aging.** This program outlines 12 ways to healthy living, physical activity, healthy eating, brain health, staying social and taking care of finances, among other topics.

Yelland added that K-State’s Center on Aging offers graduate and undergraduate degrees in gerontology. Its graduate program is listed as one of the top 5 programs in the United States, she said.

“The need for gerontologists and professionals that understand aging has never been greater,” Yelland said. “So opening that opportunity for students to understand the importance of aging, and how to address aging issues in their own career, is incredibly important. And we are so excited to be able to offer that opportunity to students and professionals.”
For more information and guidance on aging well, contact your local extension office.

“There’s not a whole lot of people that have the goal to live in long term care facilities,” Yelland said. “Most of us want to age in our home and live independently as long as possible. K-State Research and Extension is working to help older adults in that way.”

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story


Keys to Embracing Aging, https://www.aging.k-state.edu/programs/embracing-aging/embracing-aging.html

K-State Center on Aging, https://www.hhs.k-state.edu/aging

K-State Research and Extension local offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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Written by:
Pat Melgares
785-532-1160
melgares@ksu.edu

For more information:
Erin Yelland
785-532-5510
erinyelland@ksu.edu