

TRENDS & Ideas

BABY BOOMERS

Not Your Father's Oldsmobile . . .

As they enter middle age, baby boomers are becoming more conservative—but they are not turning into clones of their parents. In fact, in some ways they have

brought their parents around to their way of thinking.

Baby boomers, whose median age is now 40, are more likely to condemn adultery and premarital sex

than they were 20 years ago, according to the General Society Survey from the University of Chicago-based National Opinion Research Center. On the other hand,

writes Susan Mitchell in *American Demographics*, boomers are more committed than ever to equal rights for blacks and women.

On the race issue, a generation gap still exists. Two-thirds of boomers support fair housing laws and would try to integrate segregated social clubs; the vast majority do not believe in laws against interracial marriage; and 9 in 10 would vote for a black presidential candidate. On all these issues, whites of the World War II generation (those born between 1909 and 1932) are likely to disagree with the boomers. Furthermore, these older persons are much more likely to attribute blacks' lower socioeconomic status to personal characteristics of blacks as a group.

The WWII generation also has not changed its mind about women's roles: 29 percent say men should govern the country; 44 percent say a wife's primary job is to support her husband; and 60 percent believe preschoolers suffer if their mothers work. For boomers, on the other hand, the percentages who would agree with these statements are 11 percent, 12 percent, and just over 33 percent, respectively.

Despite these disagreements, the differences in attitude between the generations are not as gaping as they were 20 years ago. And



boomers are approaching their parents' outlook in several areas. Twice as many boomers now claim that they are slightly to extremely conservative compared with 20 years ago (35 percent versus 17 percent), while those claiming to be slightly to extremely liberal have fallen from 43 percent to 28 percent. Boomers are now more likely to think the courts should be harsher on criminals, more likely to support the death penalty, and less likely to look to the government for solutions to poverty and healthcare.

On the other hand, "question authority" remains an operative maxim for the boomers, one that has been adopted by Americans of all ages. Confidence in leaders of science and education, the medical community, and major companies has declined universally—evidence that the boomers' influence on their parents has sometimes been more significant than the reverse.

THE ELDERLY

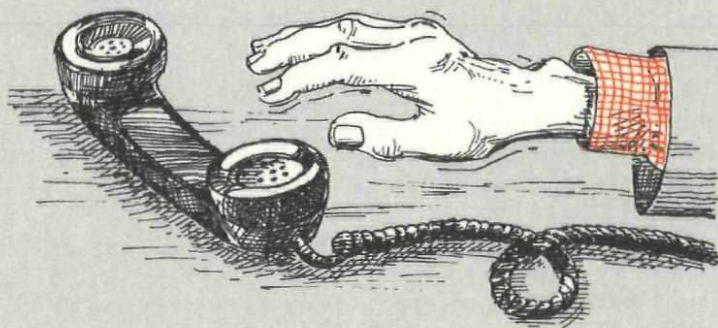
I've Fallen and I Can't Get Up

Elderly people who live alone are commonly found helpless or dead in their homes, according to a recent study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Researcher R. Jan Gurley, MD, and colleagues analyzed data from San Francisco paramedics indicating that, over a 12-week period, they were called 387 times to assist persons found dead or incapacitated in their homes, accounting for 3.7 percent of all calls. The median age of the persons was 73 years, and the rate of such incidences increased dramatically with age. Very elderly men, particularly black men, appear to be at greatest risk.

The researchers report that 23 percent of the persons were found dead, and another 5 percent died in the hospital. Ten percent of those found alive had suffered for three days; only 38 percent of them survived. The majority of those who are

hospitalized after such ordeals do not return to independent living.

These statistics can be alarming for the elderly, who largely prefer living independently yet fear they would not be able to get help if they should need it. Although the study was not able to pinpoint relative risk factors, most of the persons found helpless or dead are likely to have been isolated socially, the researchers speculate. Earlier intervention, they conclude, could reduce both mortality and suffering. For example, healthcare providers familiar with the patients might institute a system to check on them every 12 to 24 hours. Community members could be educated and enlisted to help check on their elderly neighbors. Other possibilities are electronic telephone checks, calling circles among elderly people, and the use of commercial summoning devices.



RURAL HEALTH

Quiet Crisis in the Country

Although the farm crisis of the 1980s is long over, a less publicized crisis involving rural healthcare is growing, writes Wayne Hearn in *American Medical News*. And, he says, proposed reforms of Medicare and Medicaid are likely to make the problem even worse.

In the crisis of the eighties, farm foreclosures drove hundreds of thousands of families from the land, at the same time weakening the rural economy and making farm communities less attractive to healthcare professionals. The National Health Service Corps has designated 1,813 rural areas, with a combined population of 22 million, as "health professional shortage areas" (HPSAs). These rural

HPSAs, making up 68 percent of all those in the nation, have doubled since 1978. Although the United States has an overall surplus of physicians, it has 2,255 vacancies for primary care doctors in its rural HPSAs.

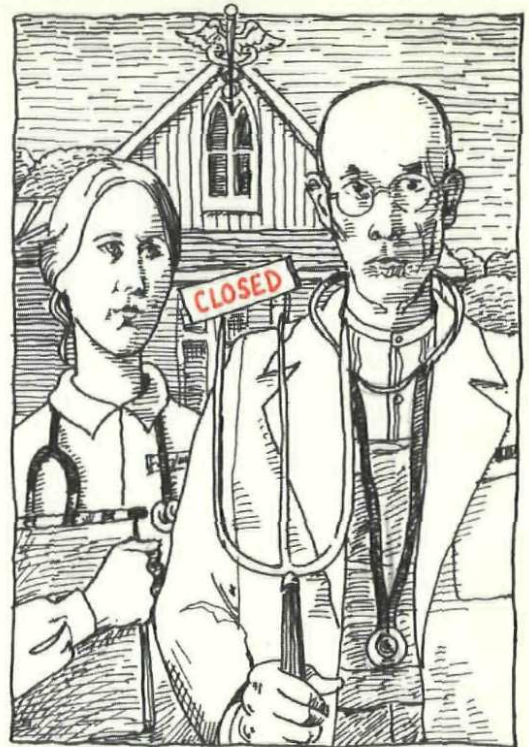
The physician shortage has been exacerbated by the closing, between 1980 and 1993, of 409 rural hospitals. Because a rural hospital is often one of the larger employers in its community, closing one tends to cause more social damage than closing an urban facility does.

The rural healthcare crisis is further complicated by the fact that nearly 15 percent of rural residents are 65 or older (compared with only 12 percent of city dwellers),

according to the 1990 census. In 1992 Medicare beneficiaries constituted 16 percent of rural residents (as opposed to only 13 percent of city residents). Moreover, almost 18 percent of rural Medicare beneficiaries had incomes beneath the poverty level (compared with 12 percent of those in the city).

Similar city/country differences can be seen among people enrolled in Medicaid. Although approximately the same proportion of rural and urban residents get Medicaid benefits, 17.5 percent of rural beneficiaries are below the poverty level, whereas only 15 percent of city beneficiaries are impoverished.

Because rural people are relatively older and poorer than urban people, reforms



of Medicare and Medicaid—which are almost certain to lower reimbursement rates—will further weaken healthcare in farm communities. And, because rural areas have lost political clout along with population, healthcare experts are not optimistic about reversing this trend. Jeffrey Human is director of the Office of Rural Health

Policy, a federal agency that was created to deal with the farm crisis of the eighties but is now, in the nineties, targeted by budget cutters for shutdown. "We need help to get rural health back in the spotlight," he said at a recent conference on the topic, "and I don't really have a good feel right now for what people are thinking."

TRAUMA CARE

The Exploding Cost of Gunfire

Gunshot wounds are rapidly overtaking auto accidents as the leading cause of U.S. injury death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But whereas most car crash victims have private insurance, four out of five gunshot victims are uninsured or on welfare. This means, writes Susan Headden in *U.S. News & World Report*, that taxpayers are now picking up a \$4.5 billion annual tab.

The zooming medical costs of gunshot wounds—nearly nine times what they were—have a variety of causes. Among them are:

- The drug trade. Drug traffickers increasingly use firearms in their competition with each other.

Experts estimate that as many as half of gun homicide victims—70 percent in some cities—are themselves offenders. Wounded offenders often survive only to be shot again.

"About 20 percent of our gunshot victims are what we call our 'frequent fliers,'" says Andrew Burgess, MD, a Baltimore surgeon.

- More powerful weapons.

Traffickers are turning to powerful semiautomatic weapons, such as the 9-millimeter pistol, which allows a shooter to fire up to 36 bullets without reloading. Because they can quickly inflict multiple wounds on a human target, such weapons are popular.

- More severe wounds. Such sophisticated weapons tend to do more damage than did the old "Saturday night special." And there is evidence that today's drug traffickers deliberately try to cripple, rather than kill. The proportion of spinal cord injuries caused by gunfire has more than doubled in the past 20 years. The victims, often young, will require lifelong care, the cost of which can run into millions of dollars.

Hospitals have traditionally paid for such care through cost-shifting: increasing the bills of those who do have insurance. However, as HMOs require hospitals to cut costs, cost-shifting becomes more difficult. More than 60 urban trauma centers, caught in this cost squeeze, have been forced to close in the past decade. Physicians have begun to lobby for restrictions on handguns.