

Keeping Our Eyes on the Ball: The Sightlines Project

Stanford's Center on Longevity is doing research across age groups on health, financial security and social engagement. A warning sign: Boomers are less tied to their communities, families and friends.

A recent survey by Peter Hart Research Associates found that three of four Americans would like to live to 100 if they could do so in good health. Yet close to the same number reported that they anticipated retiring from work at 65, ate too much and didn't exercise as much as they should. Thriving in an era of longevity demands that we change the way we live.

Small and seemingly innocuous choices we make on a daily basis exert far more influence over our health and well-being than our genes. Yet people are relatively insensitive to patterns that put us at risk, like spending a little more money than we earn, eating poorly or gradually disengaging from our neighborhoods and even close friends. To make matters worse, it's difficult, if not impossible, for people to see into

the distant future. We take great care to ensure we'll feel happy this evening, but we take far less care of our future selves.

To help individuals, policymakers, and thought leaders see the future more clearly, the Stanford Center on Longevity launched the Sightlines Project, a partnership with Time magazine, in February. The project is based on analyses of eight nationally



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representative, high-quality, multiyear studies involving more than 1.2 million Americans over two decades. We analyzed the percentage of Americans in each of six age groups who are doing well in three areas that are crucial to long-term well-being: healthful living, financial security and social engagement. Rather than compare younger people to older people, we compared people today to people who were of the same age 15 to 20 years ago. This way we produced a dynamic snapshot of trends for better and for worse.

The report card is mixed. Americans have made substantial progress in several areas, while problems have worsened in others. Smoking—the top preventable cause of morbidity and early mortality—has declined in every age group, and for the first time in decades, Americans are exercising more regularly. Problems related to diet and sleep, in contrast, are widespread and show no signs of abating. Student debt is far higher than it was in 2000. Sightlines reveals that fewer younger people are buying homes or making other types of

investments, thus risking their long-term financial security.

Findings about social engagement were startling and have serious implications for an aging society. Feeling socially connected to others is critical to physical and mental health, and across age groups, traditional modes of social engagement are waning: Younger and older Americans are not as likely to visit with neighbors or participate in community or religious organizations as their counterparts 20 years ago. One in five Americans report that they do not have friends or family on whom they can rely for help.

The most dramatic change in social engagement was observed in 55- to 64-year-olds. This cohort, which is nearing retirement, is not only engaging less with their communities, but they have fewer meaningful interactions with their spouses or partners and weaker ties to family and friends.

Because of the size of the boomer cohort, the norms they set will not only have short-term ramifications, they may endure

for generations. A great deal is at stake. If boomers establish expectations about giving back to communities and investing in younger generations, they can put the United States on track to become a better nation. In contrast, if they bow out and withdraw—as Sightlines suggests they may—we risk a different, dimmer future.

One of Sightlines' key aims is to identify critical junctures when change is needed and initiate discussions about solutions. Finding purposeful engagement may be just what boomers need: A growing body of research suggests that volunteering produces benefits to the physical and mental health of volunteers. Near-retirement age represents a "sweet spot" for recruitment. More than 70 percent of people who volunteer prior to retirement continue to volunteer afterward—far more than those who had not volunteered while working. It's time to ask boomers to re-engage and enlist in organizations like Encore.org to lead a social movement to improve the world. This time, let's trust people over 30.

The Sightlines Project will continue to monitor signs of progress and areas of concern as we position the nation for longevity. We look forward to engaging the public, employers, industry leaders and policymakers in discussions about creating a culture that supports long life.

Amy Yotopoulos co-authored this article.