

BY WILLIAM H. FREY

The leading edge

of the baby boom generation – somewhat arbitrarily defined as Americans born between 1946 and 1964 – is turning 65. Of course, the primary reason the graying of the boomers is attracting attention is their numbers. But the boomers’ impact on everything from the economy to family life goes beyond the sheer size of the cohort.

Boomers represent a cultural bridge between the Depression generation and the relatively small (post-Pill) Gen X and Gen Y contingents. The change is perhaps most apparent in terms of race and ethnicity. Just 19 percent of the living pre-boomers are non-white, compared to 38 percent of the post-boomers. And just 7 percent of those pre-boomers speak a language other than English at home, compared to 16 percent of the post-boomers.

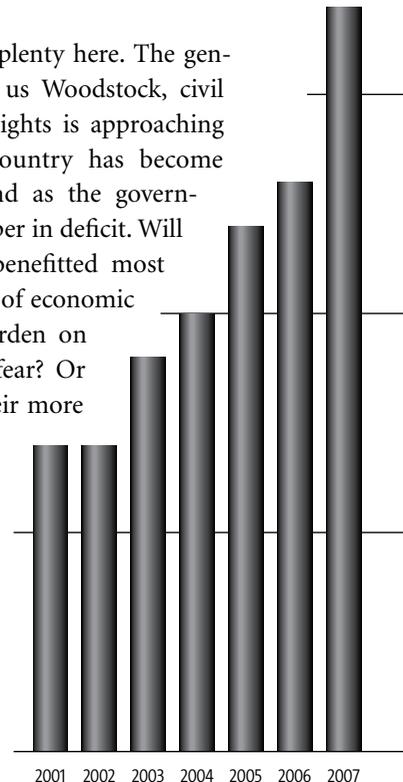
Consider, too, that this is by far the most educated generation to reach senior status. The success of the drives for social equality doubled the proportion of women graduating college, while increasing the percentage of blacks who are college educated from 11 to 18. The narrowing of the gender gap sent shock waves through the culture, among other effects, undermining the traditional nuclear family. Three-quarters of boomer women worked outside their homes in mid-life, compared to just half of those born dur-

ing the Depression. These better-educated women (with a better shot at good jobs) were, of course, more independent in financial terms, which goes a long way toward explaining why the proportion who were divorced or never married by middle age doubled.

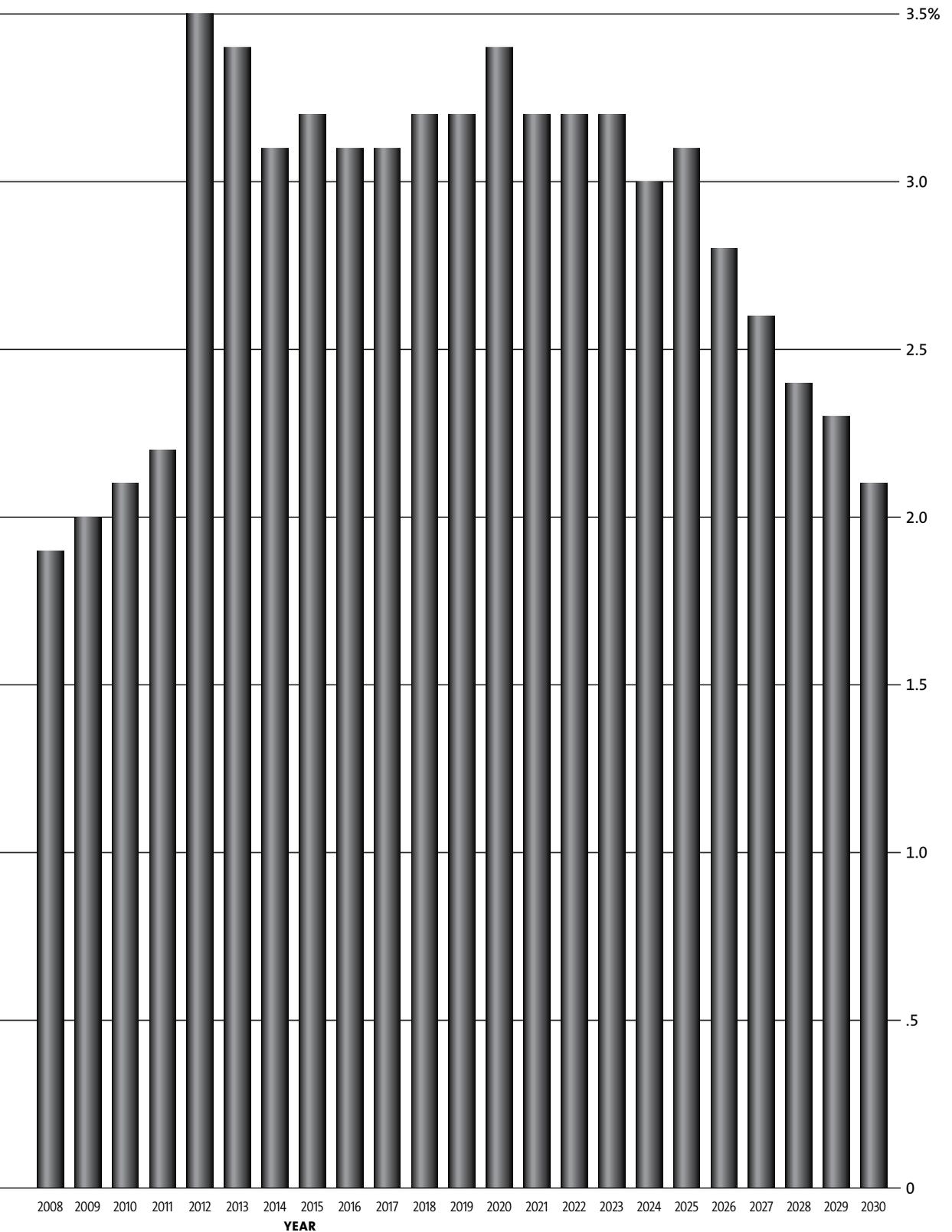
There are ironies aplenty here. The generation that brought us Woodstock, civil rights and abortion rights is approaching seniorhood as the country has become more conservative and as the government budget falls deeper in deficit. Will the generation that benefitted most from the golden years of economic growth become a burden on the young, as many fear? Or will they return to their more tolerant roots, redefining the way seniors adapt to cultural change?

Stay tuned: Who says demography is a snooze?

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ANNUAL GROWTH RATE OF THE 65+ POPULATION



SOURCE: William H. Frey analysis of US Census sources