

CHAPTER 1

The Need

THE DEMOGRAPHIC IMPERATIVE

The primary factor driving the need to prepare gerontologically competent social workers is a rapidly growing population age 65 and over, with the first of the aging Boomers turning 60 years old in 2006. By 2020—only 14 years from now—16% of Americans will be age 65 and older, compared with slightly less than 13% today. In the year 2006 alone, 7,918 Baby Boomers turned 60 each day (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001a, 2001b; Administration on Aging, 2002). And these Senior Boomers are expected to live longer than prior generations. Even though the Boomers will be healthier on average than prior generations, their sheer numbers will increase the demand for community-based services to prevent and manage chronic illness.

With the aging of the Baby Boomers, the U.S. population age 65 and over is projected to increase by 147% between 2000 and 2050, whereas the population as a whole will increase 49% during this same period. No other demographic shift in recent history will have such a profound impact on every societal institution—work, retirement, education, health care, and the family—and accordingly on the social work profession.

The greatest increases will be among those ages 85 and older. In fact, by 2025, 1 in 26 Americans can expect to live to age 100, compared to 1 in 500 in 2000. Many of these oldest old will be cognitively impaired; nearly 50% of individuals age 85 or older now suffer from Alzheimer's disease (Merck Institute, 2002; National Center for Health Statistics, 2003). Those over age 85 are also more likely to have chronic illnesses that require health and long-term care and other support services than do those who are age 65-74 (Administration on Aging, 2004). This vulnerable population is likely to need increased social work services, although social workers also work with the healthy aging.

The population charts on the next page illustrate the dramatic growth of the oldest old.

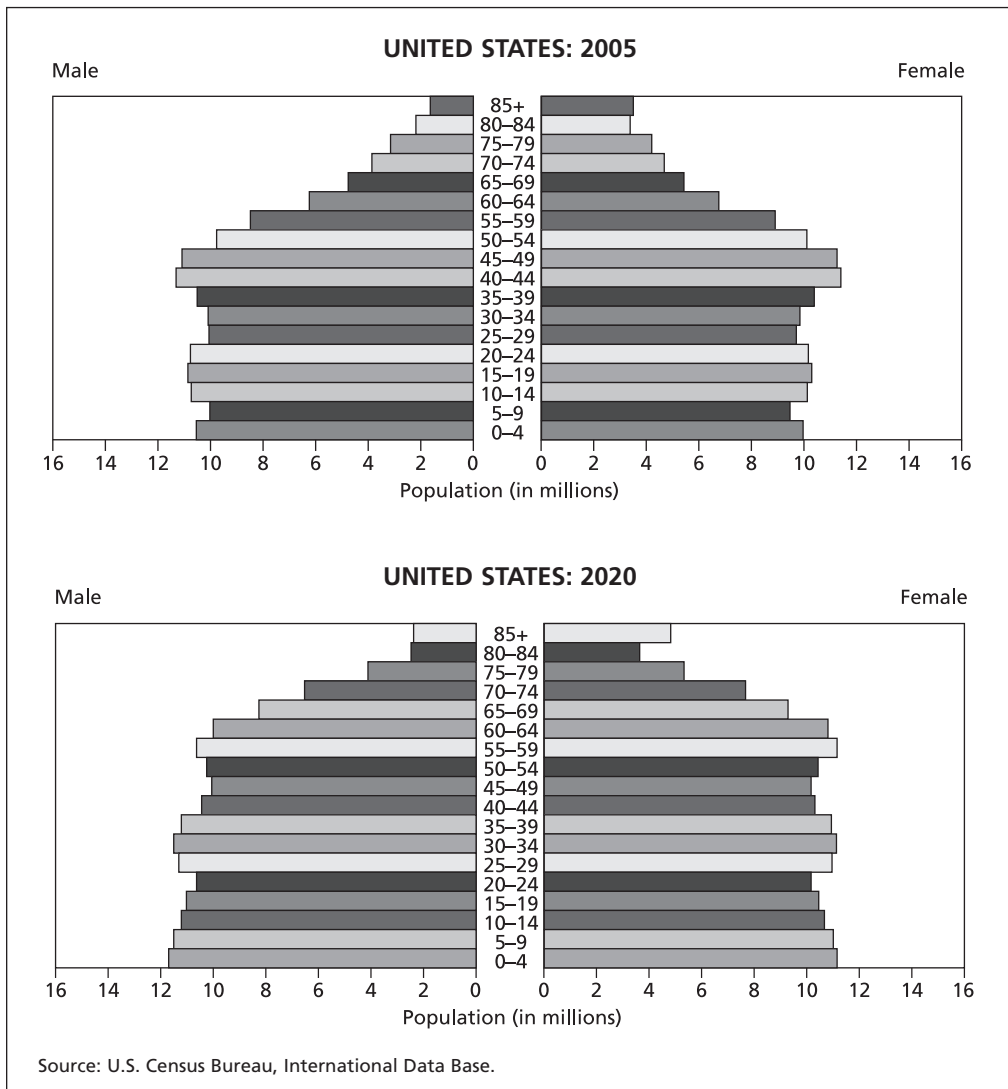
AGING AS A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

Although social work as a profession has committed itself to social justice, the economic and health disparities faced by older adults, especially by women and elders of color, have not received adequate social work attention. Some groups of elders

face lifetime inequities that are exacerbated with age. Several examples provide compelling evidence for why foundation courses should include gerontological content as an important component in the ongoing efforts to address social justice issues.

Pockets of Persistent Poverty

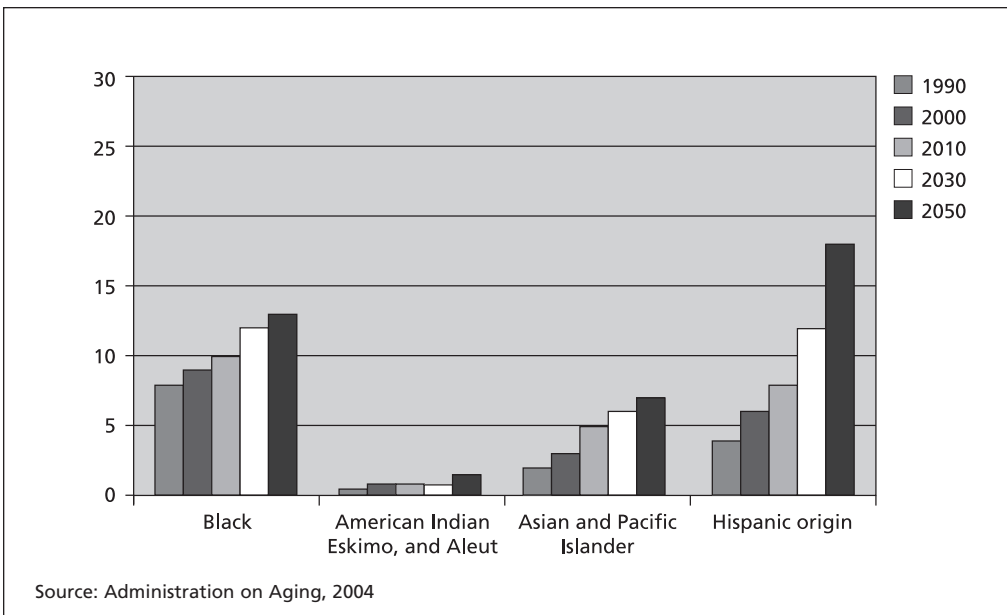
Media often portray older adults as financially well off, at the expense of younger populations. The declining rate of poverty among older adults over the past 40 years is largely due to Social Security. Although the incidence of poverty for older adults (10.4%) is lower than that for persons under age 18 (16.7%), elders of color and women experience significantly higher poverty rates. For example, twice as many women age 65 and over are poor compared to their male counterparts.



Nearly three times as many older African Americans and over twice as many Latino elders are poor compared to their Caucasian peers. And the rate of poverty increases with age: nearly half of those age 85 and over are either poor or near-poor, with African American women age 85 and older forming the poorest group in our society (Hudson, 2002). Recent data suggest that Senior Boomers will face economic vicissitudes because of their low savings and pension rates and the fiscal threats to Social Security and Medicare (American Association of Retired Persons, 2006).

Growing Diversity of Elders

The older population is increasingly diverse. Currently, elders of color form about 16.4% of the population age 65 and older: only 8% are African American, 5.6% Latino, 2.4% Asian and Pacific Islander, and less than 1% Native American. Although the proportion of young adults to elders is currently greater in populations of color than in the Caucasian population, this pattern is also changing rapidly. By 2030, elders of color will form over 33% of the older population, with the most rapid growth of elders among Asian/Pacific Islanders and Latinos (Administration Aging, 2003; National Institutes of Health, 2000). Because of women's longer life expectancy than men's, women remain the majority of adults age 65 and older, with the proportion increasing further among elders age 85 and over and nursing home residents. The number of gay/lesbian/bisexual or transgender elders is currently estimated to be 1 to 3 million, and this will grow to 2 to 6 million by 2030. Social workers committed to social justice need the knowledge, skills, and values



to work effectively with elders who have been historically disadvantaged and marginalized across the life course. In addition, these gerontological skills need to be coupled with graduates' cultural competence.

The rapid growth of elders of color and of all populations age 85 and over is of concern because of the high rate of killer chronic illness, such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease, and of nursing home admission associated with aging, on overall rate that increases from 39% for those age 65 to 74 to 49% for those age 85 and over (Seperson, 2002), and because of poverty among the oldest old population. To illustrate the intersections of poverty, race, gender, and health status, African American women age 85 and older—the poorest group in our society—face high rates of diabetes, stroke, and heart disease. Poverty typically translates into health disparities. For example, 22% of low-income elders report that their health needs go unmet, whereas only 2.5% of middle- and upper-income elders report unmet needs (Whitfield & Hayward, 2003).

Given social work's historical commitment to social justice and serving the underserved, social workers—perhaps more than other helping professionals—are likely to be working daily with vulnerable elders. But unless social work educators endeavor to meet this need, graduates will lack the gerontological and cultural competencies to do so effectively. The GeroRich Project was the first large-scale program in which social work faculty and field instructors stepped up to the challenge to provide all BSW and MSW graduates with foundation gerontological competencies.

WORKFORCE NEEDS

The shortage of BSW- and MSW-level social workers with gerontological competencies to provide effective psychosocial care to the growing and increasingly diverse population of older adults and their families has been documented for nearly 30 years (Berkman, Gardner, Zodikoff, & Harooytan, 2005; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004; Council on Social Work Education/SAGE-SW, 2001). As early as 1987, predictions were that 60,000-70,000 geriatric social workers would be required to meet the needs of older adults by 2020 (National Institute of Aging, 1987), an estimate documented again in 2004 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). It has also been estimated that 25% or 5000 MSW students a year across all social work programs would need to graduate with a focus on gerontology to meet these demands, yet only 3% of graduate students specialize in aging (Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson, & Feldman, 2000).

Despite this demand, a national shortage of gerontological social workers persists (NASW, 2006). In 2001, only 3% of the 150,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers identified their primary area of social work practice as gerontology (Rosen & Zlotnik, 2001). This had increased by 2005, but only to

9% of a sample of licensed National Association of Social Workers (NASW) members.

The gap between the number of gerontological social workers and workforce needs remains basically unchanged today compared with that in 1970. In both 1970 and 2005, 62% to 75% of licensed social workers from a national sample worked in some capacity with older adults and their families, but were generally not prepared to do so (NASW, 2005; Peterson & Wendt, 1990). Many of these social workers may not have imagined that they would ever work with “old people.” But they began to see older adults in child welfare, school, and pediatric settings, perhaps as a result of the growth of grandparents who are primary caregivers to grandchildren. Or they encountered elders in health and mental health settings, homeless shelters, and substance abuse and HIV/AIDS treatment settings. With the aging of the Baby Boomers, nearly all social workers will interact with older adults and their families within the next 25 years, regardless of the practice setting.



Limited Specialized Content on Aging

The limited amount of advanced or specialized content on aging in BSW and MSW programs contributes to the lack of a gerontologically prepared social work workforce. Fewer social work programs (approximately 18%) offer an MSW specialization in aging now than did in the early 1980s (almost 50%) or in the early 1990s (approximately 33%) (2004-05 CSWE Annual Statistics, 2005; Lubben, Damron-Rodriguez, & Beck, 1992; Rosen, Zlotnick, & Singer, 2002). Of the 180 MSW programs that indicated their advanced content was organized by concentrations in 2004-05, aging was the least frequently offered advanced specialization.

Not surprisingly, the largest concentration/specialization was (and still is) child welfare, followed by mental health and health. The extent of gerontological content has also been limited in BSW programs. For instance, only 30% of BSW programs that submitted data for the 2004-05 CSWE Annual Statistics report offered any courses on aging, and most indicated little (0 to 10%) gero content in foundation courses (2004-05 CSWE Statistics, 2005).

Even when such specialized gerontological content or coursework exists, relatively few students choose to pursue it. Approximately 25% of BSW and 20% of MSW students have taken a course in gerontology (Cummings, Alder, & DeCoster, 2005). One reason for this is that nearly 50% of MSW students state that they have little or no interest in working with older adults after graduation (Cummings & Galambos, 2002). Similarly, less than 20% of MSW students cite older adults as a population that they would like to work with in the future (Cummings et al., 2005). The lack of student interest in gerontological social work is also the case at the undergraduate level, where only 5% of BSW students are interested in working with elders (Scharlach et al., 2000).

The reasons why students choose not to work with older adults and conversely factors that may contribute to students' pursuing a gerontological social work career are also extensively documented (Lubben et al., 1992; Cummings & Galambos, 2002; Cummings & DeCoster, 2003; Mason & Sanders, 2004; Gibelman & Schervish, 1997; Scharlach et al., 2000). Factors that have been identified that affect the likelihood of a career in gerontological social work include early exposure to and positive interaction with older adults in classes, volunteer work, or field placements; a close and positive personal relationship with an older adult relative; and perceived skills to work with elders (Cummings, Galambos, & DeCoster, 2003; Mason & Sanders, 2004). Also, the interest in working with elders typically emerges in a process-like fashion rather than being a sudden decision, regardless of whether the interest is in marked contrast to previous interests or a developing life-long passion (Lawrance, Jarman-Rhodes, Dunkle, Campbell, Bakalar, & Li, 2002).

Certain factors undergird the rationale for the GeroRich Project:

- The dramatic growth and increasing diversity of older adults.
- The lack of courses specifically focused on older adults at both the BSW and MSW levels.
- The small percentage of BSW and MSW students in gerontological courses or specializations.
- The fact that 70-75% of social workers work in some capacity with older adults but have generally not been prepared to do so.
- The importance of positive and early experiences with older adults in influencing students' decisions to work with elders.

These factors point to the need to prepare all social work graduates with foundation gerontological competencies. Consequently, the GeroRich Project developed a model of planned change to infuse gerontological content and experiential learning with elders into foundation BSW and MSW courses.

The GeroRich Project's rationale and goals, discussed in the next chapter, emerge from this need for gerontological competencies across BSW and MSW program levels, and from the overarching commitment to a planned model of change to prepare gerontologically competent graduates.

