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## *Age-friendly Values and Beliefs, National Survey*

May, 2016

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## Executive Summary

Population aging represents a human success story, and age-friendly communities are being shaped throughout the U.S. (and the world) to take advantage of the tremendous assets that older adults offer to their communities. The push to create age-friendly communities should be understood in historical context, as 2015 was an important year for older Americans, from the expansion of the U.S. and Global Networks of Age-Friendly Communities to the White House Conference on Aging, to anniversaries for some of the most important aging-related policies in U.S. history (e.g., Medicare, Medicaid, Older Americans Act, and Social Security).

This national survey conducted by DHM Research and partners provides insight into the values and beliefs of Americans across the generations with respect to aspects of age-friendly communities. Several research findings pertinent to local and national leaders and policymakers should be highlighted:

- ❖ The meaning of “age” in age-friendly communities: 35% of respondents felt age-friendly communities were for “all ages,” while 30% felt that efforts were for “older/elderly/senior” residents; when asked to identify a specific age category age-friendly communities should serve, 47% of participants responded “older adults” while 43% responded “all ages.”
- ❖ 82% of respondents aged 18+ felt that aging was an equity issue, with respondents detailing employment and age discrimination among the top equity concerns.
- ❖ The most important age-friendly domains were identified as (1) housing, (2) health services, (3) employment & the economy, (4) respect & inclusion, and (5) transportation.
- ❖ Across respondents aged 18+, 73% felt the media portrayed older adults as “vulnerable” and as having “many needs.” Our study also found differences by age: younger respondents aged 18-44, felt older adults’ needs were more prevalent than their assets (26%); conversely, respondents aged 45+ felt older adults’ assets were more prevalent than their needs (54%).
- ❖ 33% of respondents aged 18+ identified alignment of the housing, transportation, and social needs of seniors and people with disabilities as the top strategy for supporting seniors and people with disabilities to achieve and maintain their financial independence.
- ❖ Housing: Although respondents aged 18+ expressed a preference (33%) for moving to a single-family home if they were to move within their neighborhood, respondents aged 65+ showed a greater interest higher density housing, including moving to a home share (28%) or an apartment or condo (23%).
- ❖ Americans across all ages felt that healthcare’s primary focus should be on wellness and healthy living, not treating illness; 72% of all respondents aged 18+ and 82% of the age 75+ respondents supported a preventive approach to healthcare.
- ❖ Similarities in values and beliefs across the generations existed with respect to the environment, including:
  - The majority of respondents in each age group felt our country would be better off if we all consumed less.
  - More than 60% of respondents in each age group felt that it was important to increase taxes/reallocate funds in order to increase renewable energy incentives and investments.

Moving forward, our communities will continue to grow older, and it is imperative that we understand citizens’ values and beliefs. This research provides information that can help to cultivate the assets in our communities while simultaneously preparing for needs and desires.

## Introduction

This report is timely. In fact, it is overdue, as it covers a topic – the values and beliefs of Americans across the generations – that is at the forefront of social issues in the U.S. 2015 was an important year for older Americans, as it marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act, as well as the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Social Security. The White House Conference on Aging was also held – a once-a-decade conference sponsored by the Executive Office of the President of the U.S. – which provided a forum to address the future of an aging America, including details about creating age-friendly communities.<sup>1</sup> This study provides an opportune first step to providing insights to national policymakers, leaders, and researchers concerned with preparing for an aging America. Future opinion research is planned to elaborate and expand on these findings.

Most Americans know the terms “Baby Boomers” and “Millennials,” but they may not understand how these age cohorts feel about their communities. In 2012, there were approximately 77 million Boomers (24% of the population) and in 2030 there will be approximately 60 million (17% of the population).<sup>2</sup> Millennials, which overtook Boomers as the largest “generation” in 2015,<sup>3</sup> are ever present in the eyes of the media, for good or bad. They are more ethnically diverse than the Baby Boomers (i.e., only 59% reported being White, compared to 73% of Boomers) and both cohorts represent important target groups for companies, politicians, and others.<sup>4</sup> This report elucidates collective patterns and trends that matter in our communities, political approaches, and research efforts.

## Methods

DHM Research completed surveys in 2015 and 2016 designed to identify on the values and beliefs of U.S. residents across generations. With the assistance of researchers at Portland State University’s Institute on Aging, DHM Research has focused on highlighting findings pertaining to Americans’ values and beliefs concerning age-friendly communities.

In order to obtain an adequate sample size across age cohorts, the 2015 U.S. sample was drawn from online panels and consisted of 1,295 completed interviews, approximately 200 for most age cohorts (18-34: 296; 35-44:194; 45-54: 208; 55-64: 205; 65-74: 206; 75+: 186). The use of online panels affords the advantages of collecting verbatim responses to open-ended questions in order to provide more valid content analysis, and to minimize the recency-latency bias of administering scaling questions over the telephone.

The margin of error for the total sample (N=1,295) is +/- 2.7%; for each age cohort (n=200) it is approximately +/- 6.9%. The 2016 U.S. sample included an online panel with 535 completed interviews with about 200 for each of three age cohorts (18-34: 155; 35-54:183; 55+: 195). The margin of error for this total sample (N=535) is +/- 4.3%; for each age cohort (n=200) it is approximately +/- 6.9%. Quotas and statistical weighting were used to control for region and gender to ensure a representative sample within each age cohort for

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<sup>1</sup>The White House (2015). 2015 White House Conference on Aging: 2015 report. Retrieved from: [www.whitehouseconferenceonaging.gov/2015-WHCOA-Final-Report.pdf](http://www.whitehouseconferenceonaging.gov/2015-WHCOA-Final-Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Colby, S. L., & Ortman, J. M. (May, 2014). The baby boomer cohort in the United States: 2012 to 2060. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports. Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p25-1141.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Fry, R., (January 16, 2015). This year, Millennials will overtake Baby Boomers. Pew Research Center, FactTank. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/16/this-year-millennials-will-overtake-baby-boomers/>

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center U.S. Politics & Policy (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2011/11/03/section-1-how-generations-have-changed/>

each sample; also, both samples were weighted proportionally by age cohort to ensure a representative overall sample.

### Age-friendly Values and Beliefs

In 2006-07, the dual trends of population aging and urbanization inspired the World Health Organization (WHO) to study characteristics of age-friendly cities. In 2010, the WHO created a global network to assist communities in moving toward creating age-friendly environments. AARP coordinates this network in the U.S. To date, much of the pertinent research has been carried out internationally or at the local level; little national attention in the U.S. has been given to the values and beliefs concerning age-friendly communities until the present study of Americans’ opinions.

A relevant exception is the recent FrameWorks Institute study of Americans’ views of aging and older adults.<sup>5</sup> This study found that older adults are typically seen through a negative and/or deficit-based perspective and highlighted many misconceptions, such as older adults’ capabilities frequently being associated with decline, and older adults being seen as culpable for their own circumstances. Our study had similar findings, with 73% of all respondents aged 18+ feeling that the media portrayed older adults as “vulnerable” and as having “many needs;” only 22% felt that the media portrayed older adults as having “many assets” and being “vibrant.” Furthermore, a substantial proportion of respondents felt that older adults are “becoming a demographic crisis” (45%) and are a “burden on the economy” (44%). Our study also found differences by age regarding perceptions of older adults: 26% of respondents aged 18-44, felt older adults’ needs were more prevalent than their assets (26%); conversely, 54% of respondents aged 45+ felt older adults’ assets were more prevalent than their needs.

Various domains are thought to contribute to a community’s age friendliness. The WHO defines eight, and other communities expand or contract these. The ten domains of focus in Portland, Oregon’s, effort – one of the first and longest-running age-friendly initiatives in the world – formed the basis for the questions concerning age friendliness in this study.<sup>6</sup> Asked to rank the “most important age-friendly areas,” respondents prioritized five domains (N=1,295): housing, health services, employment and the economy, transportation, and respect and inclusion (see Figure 1). The age groups’ (18-44 and 45+) rankings were remarkably similar.

**Figure 1 - Most Important Age-Friendly Domains**



<sup>5</sup> Robbins, L. A. (2015). Gauging aging: How does the American public truly perceive older age – and older people? *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, 39(3).

<sup>6</sup> Portland and Multnomah County’s ten age-friendly domains include: (1) housing, (2) transportation, (3) outdoors spaces and buildings, (4) civic participation and engagement, (5) employment and the economy, (6) social participation, (7) respect and social inclusion, (8) communication and information, (9) community services, and (10) health services.

One dilemma in efforts to make communities “age friendly” has concerned what, exactly, is meant by “age” and which age groups should be focused on in these endeavors. In an attempt to learn about Americans’ perceptions of age-friendly communities, we asked the following open-ended question: “In a few words, what comes to mind when you think of an “age-friendly community?” A content analysis of a randomly selected subset of responses to this question (n=150) revealed that there are two distinct camps when it comes to defining the “age” in “age friendly.” Some 35% of the subset mentioned that these communities should cater to residents of “all ages” while approximately 30% described age-friendly communities as those geared towards “older/elderly/senior” residents; other responses detailed a variety of housing types, the prevalence of supportive programs and services, a community designed for accessibility, and values such as “acceptance,” “respect,” and “equality.”

These findings highlight the importance of age-friendly initiatives focusing on building communities for all ages and abilities, rather than focusing on an older subset of the population. In fact, when asked to identify the specific age category that best described the population age-friendly communities should serve, 47% of participants responded “older adults,” while 43% responded “all ages” (other responses included: “children and youth” (1%); “young adults” (3%), “middle-aged adults” (5%); and “other” (1%)).

## Aging and Equity

As part of our research, we were also interested in exploring the topic of equity as it relates to age. Respondents were provided the following statement and questions: “People of color, people with disabilities, and women often experience unequal treatment, lack of fairness, or discrimination, which are termed equity issues. Do you feel that age is also an equity issue, that is, that people can also experience inequity as the result of age (e.g., young people, old people?) Why or why not?” Eighty-two percent of respondents aged 18 and older answered “yes;” only 12% answered “no” (6% answered “don’t know”).

Among the most common verbatim responses to the “why or why not” question, respondents detailed inequity pertaining to age and employment, which is not surprising since age is a federally-protected class with respect to employment.<sup>7</sup> One respondent offered the following perspective: “If you are a woman older than 35, age discrimination is a huge issue.” Another respondent compared age equity with other issues across the equity spectrum: “Age is also an equity issue but not nearly as much as being a minority, person with disabilities, or being a women [sic].”

## Housing

Respondents aged 18+ were asked to “Please rank the top three options that you would consider if you needed to move from your current home, but wanted to stay in your neighborhood or community.” Thirty-four percent ranked moving to a single-family home as their top option; 28% reported they would consider living in a home shared with a family member, friend, or someone else; 19% replied they would live in an apartment or condo; and 9% said they would consider living in a small one-story house, clustered on a property with other small houses. Those aged 65+ were less likely to have chosen a single family

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<sup>7</sup> The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 prohibits employment discrimination against persons 40 years of age or older. Retrieved from: <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/adea.cfm>.

homes and more often identified living in apartment or condo, a small one-story house, and co-housing developments (see Table 1).

**Table 1 – Top Options for Aging in One’s Neighborhood or Community if a Move Occurs**

Response Category (n=1,294)	Natl. Total	18-44	45-64	65+
Living in a single family home	33%	37%	36%	24%
Living in a home shared with a family member, friend, or someone else	28%	30%	25%	28%
Living in an apartment or condo	20%	18%	19%	23%
Living in a small one-story house, clustered on a property with other small houses	10%	7%	11%	11%
Living in a co-housing development	6%	4%	4%	10%
Living in an accessory dwelling unit on a property shared with a house	4%	3%	4%	4%

When respondents were asked to rank the “top 3 strategies for supporting seniors and people with disabilities to achieve and maintain their financial independence,”<sup>8</sup> participants across all age cohorts felt that transportation should be closely tied to housing and service needs; in particular, 33% of all respondents aged 18+ felt that providing better alignment of the housing, transportation, and social needs of seniors and people with disabilities was the top priority.

### Transportation

Transportation was a clear priority with respect to creating age-friendly communities for respondents in our research and, as mentioned above, should be aligned with housing and services. As indicated in Figure 1, both the 18-44 and the 45+ age cohorts felt that transportation was among the most important areas affecting a community’s age friendliness. Additionally, as noted in the housing section above, 33% of all respondents aged 18+ felt that providing for better alignment of the housing, transportation, and social needs of seniors and people with disabilities was their top priority (that ranked above providing physical and mental health promotion and preventative services; better access to help and information, including resources for personal financial planning; support for paid and unpaid caregivers; support for community planning to create more livable, age-friendly communities; and more access to a range of transportation options).

Transportation-related responses were also common when respondents were also asked the following open-ended question: “What is the most important issue that you want your local government officials to do something about?” Although the top three responses from those aged 18+ were “taxes” (11%), “crime/public safety” (10%), and “unemployment/jobs” (9%), three of the top 13 responses were related to transportation and mobility, including the following: tied for third was “roads and bridges” (9% overall; the

<sup>8</sup> Response options included: provide better alignment of the housing, transportation, and social needs of seniors and people with disabilities; provide more physical and mental health promotion and preventative services; provide better access to help and information, including resources for personal financial planning; provide more support for paid and unpaid caregivers; provide support for community planning to create more livable, age-friendly communities; and provide more access to a range of transportation options.

18-34 and 65+ cohorts showed strongest support); tied for sixth was “public transportation” (3% overall; the 18-34 and 55-64 age groups showed the strongest support), and “traffic congestion” (3% overall; those aged 35-54 showed the strongest support). In a verbatim response to the question asking what respondents thought comprised an age-friendly community, one person summarized the importance of mobility: “age-friendly community helps participating communities become great places for all ages by adopting such features as safe, walkable streets; better housing and transportation options; access to key services, and opportunities to participate in community activities.”

Also, when asked the following question – “Thinking of government spending, which of these two statement is closest to your view, even if neither represents your view exactly: (a) We should invest more in roads for cars; (b) We should invest in more in public transit” – respondents felt that it was better for government to invest in public transit (59%) than in roads for cars (34%). There were differences by age group, however, with respondents aged 35-44 (40%) and those 55 and over (39-43%) most likely to agree with the statement, “We should invest more in roads for cars,” and those aged 18-34 (66%) and 45-54 (62%) most likely to agree with the statement, “We should invest more in public transit.”

## Health Services

As described in Figure 1 above, health services was among the most important aspects of age-friendly communities. When respondents were asked to identify desirable healthcare actions in society, they felt the primary focus of health care should be on wellness and healthy living, not treating illness. This preventive approach to health and well-being is important with respect to creating communities that are age friendly, as it requires that our communities are livable, walkable, and provide equitable access to healthy foods and lifestyle choices. Seventy-two percent of all respondents felt it desirable to focus on a preventive approach to health, including 82% of the age 75+ cohort. Respondents across all age cohorts also felt that individuals should be held accountable for their own lifestyle choices and high risk behaviors such as smoking, drugs, and lack of exercise through higher insurance premiums. The 75+ cohort was the most supportive (74%), but the majority of all cohorts combined (67%) felt this approach was desirable.

Respondents also identified a desire to see a different health care model in the United States. Over two thirds (66% of respondents) felt that doctors’ fees should be regulated based on providing preventative care and good health rather than treating poor health. Similarly, seven in ten respondents (70%) felt that people with no insurance should pay no more than the amount insurance companies pay for identical procedures, and a majority of respondents (56%) identified a universal publicly-funded health delivery system to replace the system we have now as desirable. Interestingly, however, respondents aged 75 and over were less likely (41%) than any other age cohort to desire this approach.

Americans are willing to pay for increased health care services for children and for communities that are underserved. Eight-five percent said they would be willing to pay more in taxes or in what they pay for products and services to ensure all children, regardless of income or race, have access to essential health care. Similarly, the majority of respondents said they would be willing to pay more to ensure all people have equal access to a basic level of quality health care (79%), to create greater access to mental health services (77%), to provide accessible, quality prenatal care and education for all pregnant women in

both urban and rural areas of their state (74%), and to provide incentives for health care providers to serve rural and other underserved locations (69%).

### Employment & the Economy

President Obama’s “issues” webpage<sup>9</sup> highlights the economy, creating jobs, economic security for the middle class, and creating confidence in individuals’ and their children’s futures. Efforts to enhance economic security and create jobs must include a focus on the rapidly aging U.S. population, as recent research has shown that the 50+ workforce is a critical component to high performance businesses and economic growth.<sup>10</sup> Respondents noted that the economy/employment was the third most important area with respect to creating an age-friendly community.

Several verbatim responses offered to the question “Do you feel that age is also an equity issue” indicated the presence of age discrimination. As one person explained, “Age discrimination is a real thing and is prevalent in society.” Another respondent noted that people at various ages face discrimination: “Employers tend to discriminate against people that are too young or too old.” Overall, age discrimination pertaining to employment was the most mentioned response to the age and equity question, which underscores the importance of employers considering the adoption of age-friendly hiring and management practices.

Respondents were also asked the following question on governmental fiscal approaches: “Thinking of government spending, which of these two statements comes closest to your view, even if neither represents your view exactly: (a) the government should stimulate the economy through spending on jobs and infrastructure, and (b) government should reduce deficit spending.” While Americans as a whole were more likely to feel that the government should stimulate the economy through spending on jobs and infrastructure (55%) than to believe that the government should reducing deficit spending (42%), respondents aged 45-64 (63%) were most likely to feel that the government should stimulate the economy through spending on jobs and infrastructure, while those aged 65+ (55%) felt that government should reduce deficit spending (see Table 2). It should be noted that reducing deficit spending furthers generational equity and can be seen as an attempt by older generations to improve the economic health of future generations.

**Table 2 – Views of Governmental Fiscal Approaches to the Economy**

Response Category N = 1,295	Natl. Total	18-44	45-64	65+
Government should stimulate the economy through spending on jobs and infrastructure	55%	57%	63%	43%
Government should reduce deficit spending	42%	38%	35%	55%

When respondents were asked the following question – “Thinking of government spending, which of these two statements comes closest to your view, even if neither represents your view exactly: (a) our country would be better off if we all consumed less; or (b) we need to buy things to support a strong economy.” – all age groups felt that the U.S.

<sup>9</sup> The White House (2016). President Barack Obama. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues>.

<sup>10</sup> Hewitt, A. (2015). A business case for workers aged 50+: A look at the value of experience. Retrieved from <http://states.aarp.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/A-Business-Case-for-Older-Workers-Age-50-A-Look-at-the-Value-of-Experience.pdf>.

would be better off if we all consumed less, although respondents aged 45-64 (62%) were most likely to feel this way (see Table 3).

**Table 3 – Views on U.S. Spending as it Pertains to Economic Health for the Country**

Response Category N = 1,295	Natl. Total	18-44	45-64	65+
Our country would be better off if we all consumed less	58%	57%	62%	55%
We need to buy things to support a strong economy	35%	35%	33%	36%

Additionally, when asked to identify their willingness to increase taxes or reallocate funds in order to increase renewable energy incentives and investments, respondents aged 18+ preferred increasing taxes or reallocating funds to support renewable energy incentives and investments (66%) (see Table 4). Individuals tended to be less supportive of funding energy incentives and investments as they got older, but there was still ample support across all age groups. A similar question was asked regarding willingness to increase taxes or reallocate funds for economic development (e.g., subsidies and tax breaks for business attraction or expansion) (see Table 5). More respondents aged 18+ felt that this was important (45%) as opposed to unimportant (25%). The group least likely to feel that subsidies and tax breaks were unimportant were those aged 65 and older (19%).

**Table 4 – Willingness to Increase Taxes or Reallocate Funds in order to Increase Renewable Energy Incentives and Investments**

Response Category N = 1,295	Natl. Total	18-44	45-64	65+
Important to increase taxes/reallocate funds in order to increase renewable energy incentives and investments	66%	71%	65%	61%
Unimportant to increase taxes/reallocate funds in order to increase renewable energy incentives and investments	13%	10%	14%	15%

**Table 5 - Willingness to Increase Taxes or Reallocate Funds in order to Spur Economic Development like Subsidies and Tax Breaks for Business Attraction or Expansion.**

Response Category N = 1,295	Natl. Total	18-44	45-64	65+
Important to increase taxes/reallocate funds in order to spur economic development through subsidies/tax breaks for business attraction or expansion	45%	44%	45%	46%
Unimportant to increase taxes/reallocate funds in order to spur economic development through subsidies/tax breaks for business attraction or expansion	25%	28%	26%	19%

## Respect & Social Inclusion

The World Health Organization’s (WHO) Age-friendly Checklist highlights several age-friendly features pertaining to respect and social inclusion,<sup>11</sup> a domain found in our research to be among the top five areas respondents felt age-friendly communities should focus. When respondents were asked the following question – “Please rank the following three objectives regarding meeting the future needs of seniors and people with disabilities:

<sup>11</sup>World Health Organization (2007). Checklist of essential features of age-friendly cities. Retrieved from [http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Age\\_friendly\\_cities\\_checklist.pdf](http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Age_friendly_cities_checklist.pdf).

(a) serve all people in the manner that they choose; (b) to stay in their own homes and communities; and (c) to achieve and maintain financial independence – 39% of those aged 18 and older ranked “serve all people in the manner that they choose” as the top objective (31% selected staying in their homes/community and 30% selected achieving and maintaining financial independence). An inverse relationship existed with respect to age cohorts’ ranking “serving all people in a manner that they choose” as the top objective (i.e., 48% of the 18-34 cohort, 41% of the 35-44 cohort, 34% of the 45-54 cohort, 33% of the 55-65 cohort, and 32% of the 65+ cohort). It should be noted that this person-centered approach is in line with the WHO’s age-friendly approach to respect and social inclusion.

## Conclusion

This national survey provides insight into the values and beliefs of Americans aged 18 and older with respect to aspects of age-friendly communities. Respondents were divided on the issue of who “age-friendly communities” should serve, with 47% feeling that “age-friendly communities” should specifically serve older adults and 43% feeling that these communities should serve “all ages,” with the remainder noting that they should serve children and youth, young adults, middle-aged adults, or others. Thus, communities may be wise to emphasize that communities that work well for older adults also are beneficial for people of all ages

The most important age-friendly domains identified by respondents included those that encompass the physical (housing, transportation), social (employment & the economy, respect & social inclusion), and service environments (health services), although some variation did exist by age. Other areas emphasized by respondents included wanting a more concerted focus on planning for housing, transportation, and service needs, as well as a greater focus on preventive health, compared with acute services, by the healthcare sector. It is important to note that age was considered to be an equity issue, with age discrimination seen as being inequitable as is discrimination due to race, gender, and/or income level. Finally, respondents reported that the media generally portrays older adults negatively, yet many respondents, particularly those aged 45 and over, felt that older adults possess numerous assets and contribute positively to the community.