

The Graying and Browning of America: *Seeing “Invisible” Baby Boomers*

By Melvin Delgado, Kate Goettge, and Ernest Gonzales

BACKGROUND

According to the U.S. Census, baby boomers make up just over a quarter of the entire U.S. population—an estimated 81.5 million people.¹ Ten thousand boomers will be turning 65 *every day* over the next ten years. Not only is the country graying at a rapid pace, it is also becoming more ethnically and racially diverse. Between 1999 and 2030, older adults of color age 65 and older will increase by 217%, compared to an increase of 81% for older White, non-Latino/as.

Despite these striking demographic projections, baby boomers of color are rarely discussed in the scholarly literature, lay press, or by policymakers—they are the “invisible” baby boomers. This invisibility has proved a barrier to a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of their needs and strengths.

In this brief, we describe major challenges faced by baby boomers of color, as well as assets that can and should be leveraged when creating interventions that will foster healthy, productive aging in baby boomers of color.

CHALLENGES

Baby boomers of color face distinct challenges to their physical and mental health. This is a generation that has faced historic and persistent disparities in health care, with the result that boomers of color are more likely to be uninsured and are at higher risk for obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, hepatitis C, Alzheimer’s disease, and other illnesses and disabilities. Boomers of color are also more likely to work in physically demanding jobs with higher risk for workplace accidents and injuries, and are more likely to be victims of violence.

Compounding the poorer health status of boomers of color are factors such as lower levels of English proficiency, undocumented status, homelessness, and differences in acculturation level and cultural beliefs about health and illness. To these factors, we can add a widespread mistrust of a medical system known to discriminate against racial and ethnic minorities, as well as barriers to access to high-quality health care. All combine to put baby boomers of color at greater risk for poor health and disability, reflecting the fact that race, racism, and health are inextricably intertwined.

Meanwhile, it is clear that the socioeconomic status of boomers of color is significantly different compared to their White, non-Latino/a counterparts. The root causes of economic deprivation of boomers of color are multifactorial and are well beyond the scope of this brief. However, it is clear that 2009 unemployment rates were much higher among older African Americans and

Latino/as compared to older White adults, while those who did work earned two-thirds what White workers earned. All boomers were hit hard by the Great Recession, but sectors that traditionally employed a large number of boomers of color (construction, manufacturing, and the leisure/hospitality industries) were particularly hard hit. The Great Recession's housing market crash also hit boomers of color harder, decimating the value of what was, for many, their only major economic asset.

Retirement security is a major issue for all boomers, but particularly for boomer of color. Those who have worked low-wage jobs are limited in their post-retirement income both due to low dollar Social Security payments and lack of income from retirement investments: baby boomers of color have had less access to, and use of, retirement accounts and private pension plans. Proposed Social Security reforms will therefore impact these workers more than those who have resources above and beyond Social Security to fund their retirement years. Similarly, efforts to reduce Medicare and Medicaid costs by shifting more costs to beneficiaries will have a disproportion impact on low-income and low-wealth baby boomers of color. For those who need or want to continue working, or to return to work after retirement, the “double jeopardy” of race and age discrimination in employment may diminish their likelihood of remaining in or finding new work.

ASSETS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the health and economic challenges faced by baby boomers of color, it is important that we do not view this cohort from a strictly “deficits” perspective. Such a perspective depicts baby boomers as helpless and dependent; as economic drains on their families, communities, and society—“burdens” with limited opportunity, ability, and resources to contribute in their old age. The central message from the deficits perspective is negative and intended to convey a state of crisis for the nation.

A new narrative, one focused on assets, is much needed. Boomers of color have tremendous potential to contribute to the well-being of their communities. Such potential has been described as “invisible capital. . . the toolkit of our skills, knowledge, language, networks, and experiences, along with the set of assets we were born with: our race and gender, our family's wealth and status, they type of community in which we were raised, and the education we had as children.² In *Baby Boomers of Color: Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice* (2015), Professor Melvin Delgado defines seven types of assets possessed by boomers of color: social, human, economic, political, physical, intangible, and cultural.³ Boomers of color can use these assets to address concrete needs related to community and individual well-being, such as health services and transportation; to psychosocial needs, such as companionship and spirituality; and to information needs, such as news and communications.

Many of the “invisible” boomers have survived in communities marked by violence, substance abuse, inferior schools, poor nutrition, and high rates of unemployment and imprisonment. The skills and experience that have enabled baby boomers of color to survive and thrive against daunting challenges are particularly relevant to today's marginalized communities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSET-DRIVEN INTERVENTIONS

Many of these suggestions are derived from *Baby Boomers of Color: Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice* (2015) by Professor Delgado. We refer the reader for a fuller discussion and description in his book.

- Asset-driven interventions with baby boomers of color must stress the role of empowerment and participatory democratic principles through partnerships between the boomers and human service organizations
- Community must have a prominent role in designing interventions to increase the likelihood of assets being mobilized to serve boomers
- Prevention programs for boomers of color in the areas of financial abuse and exploitation, health, housing, income, and companionship should be expanded
- Support for civic engagement, including financial support for boomers of color to participate in community service, is an important component of minority-targeted interventions
- Title V of the Older Americans Act’s Senior Community Service Employment Program is an example of an effective program to train unemployed older adults and should be expanded to include even more boomers of color

CONCLUSION

Despite the widespread attention to the Baby Boomer generation as a whole, boomers of color have long remained an “invisible” portion of this demographic cohort. But this is not a group to be overlooked: baby boomers of color are the first generation to come of age after the Civil Rights era, and this group has witnessed—and adapted to—profound changes over their lifetimes. Though there remains a significant gap between the health and socioeconomic status of boomers of color compared to their White, non-Latino/as counterparts, boomers of color possess unique strengths, assets, and motivations to contribute to society.

END NOTES

- ¹ Howden & Meye (2011). Age and sex composition: 2010. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- ² Rabb, C. (2010). Invisible capital: How unseen forces shape entrepreneurial opportunity. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- ³ Delgado, M. (2015). *Baby Boomers of Color: Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Melvin Delgado, PhD, MS (social work), is Professor and Chair to Macro Practice at Boston University, School of Social Work. Email: delgado@bu.edu

Kate Goettge is a graduate student at Boston University, School of Social Work

Ernest Gonzales, PhD, MSSW, is an Assistant Professor and Peter Paul Professor at Boston University, School of Social Work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding for this study was partially provided by Peter Paul Professorship at Boston University.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Delgado, M., Goettge, K., & Gonzales, E. (2015). The graying and browning of America; Seeing “invisible” baby boomers. Boston, MA: Boston University, White House Conference on Aging Series, Research Brief 201507.

