



**LESSON PLANS ON AGING ISSUES:**  
*Creative Ways to Meet Social Studies Standards*

**Participation in Government**

**LOCAL ISSUES:  
TOMPKINS COUNTY**

Ithaca College Gerontology Institute  
[www.ithaca.edu/aging/schools](http://www.ithaca.edu/aging/schools)

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## **Aging And Public Policy**

### **Introduction**

The expected increase in the older population will heighten political debates about the role of government in providing for the needs of older people. The reading for this activity gives background information on the role of government since 1930 and issues that will face government into the 21st century. Students then analyze a report about local government services available at <http://www.tompkins-co.org/cofa/millenn.html>. The lesson concludes with a student assignment to interview an older adult.

### **Objectives**

Students will:

- list implications of demographic trends
- identify the period in United States history when public policy addressed elder needs in notable ways
- explain why baby boomers are the “trend generation”
- consider the combined implication of an increased proportion of minority and aged population

### **Materials**

Handout: “Aging for the Twenty-First Century: Process, Politics and Policy” by Fernando M. Torres-Gil

Handout: Review Questions for “Aging for the Twenty-First Century”

Handout: Glossary of Terms Related to Public Policy

Assignment: Interview of an Older Adult

### **Key Terms**

centralized/decentralized government, entitlement programs, Great Depression, Medicaid, Medicare, means testing, service-delivery system, Social Security Act, Supplemental Security Income, trend generation

### **Lesson Steps**

1. Introduce the handout as it relates to the course. Students can read the article as background information, using the review questions to increase comprehension.
2. Use the article as background information and an overview of the political issues on aging.
3. Familiarize students with terms listed in the handout. Teachers may decide to review the key terms before introducing the reading.
4. Distribute the interview assignment.

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Adapted from *Schools in an Aging Society: Social Studies Classroom Activities for Secondary Schools*, State of Connecticut, Department of Education and Department on Aging, 1992.

### **Extension Activities**

- Have students gather related political cartoons, magazine articles and newspaper editorials for class discussion.
- The reading provides a balanced view without taking strong political positions. Supplement this reading with current articles supporting or opposing government programs for people of different age groups. Provide information representing multiple viewpoints and allow students to formulate their own opinions.
- Invite a representative from the senior center to explain the health and human services for older adults, such as nutrition programs, Medicare and friendly visitors.
- Discuss how the baby boomers, as the “trend generation,” affected society at different ages. For example, when they were infants, the demand for baby products increased. When they were school age, new schools were built. The Beatles were popular when the baby boomers were teenagers. College campus protests during the late 1960s were organized by the baby boomers. Now working age, this generation’s preoccupation is with making money. What trends do students foresee now that baby boomers are middle age, soon to be old age?
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of age-based versus need-based programs. Age-based programs, such as Social Security, do not carry the stigma of need-based programs, such as general welfare programs. Debates center around giving benefits to those who are *entitled* because of their previous contributions, and those who are *deserving* because of minimum incomes.
- Clip political cartoons from newspapers on issues related to aging, such as health care. Have students complete short research projects identifying the key issues illustrated by the cartoons.
- Invite political leaders to discuss future trends in public policy that affect young and old.
- Hold an intergenerational discussion group on selected political and economic issues that face all generations.

## Handout

### **Aging For The Twenty-First Century: Process, Politics and Policy**

The United States is in the midst of a demographic revolution with few parallels. There will be many more older people, with the largest number occurring after the year 2000. The fastest-growing segment will be women over 85.

These demographic facts have important implications for providing health and human services to an older population and for allocating public benefits and services. The demographic revolution also raises other issues about the role of government in the delivery of public services and benefits and the public's receptivity about paying for those services. Should government be primarily responsible, or should there be a decentralized role involving local governments, individuals, and other nongovernmental groups such as church, neighborhood or family? Who should pay for these benefits and services? And finally, aging, being a lifelong process, requires a fundamental reexamination of how we instruct and require society to plan and prepare for its aging, particularly with predicted increases in life expectancy. The politics of aging must address these difficult issues, and the generations that age early in the next century must come to terms with a different set of circumstances and experiences than are now faced by older persons.

#### **Looking Back**

The modern politics of aging has been with us since the 1930s. Passage of the Social Security Act and a public recognition of the vulnerability older persons can face during economic crisis created societal receptivity to the establishment of public benefits and services. These factors also fostered the development of age-specific organizing and political activism. In short, age and aging became an accepted social and political movement during this period.

Until the decade of the 1980s, the traditional response had been to assume that the federal government has a responsibility for devising public benefits and services for older persons. The public has accepted the notion that tax dollars and public financing are necessary for funding those services. An elaborate service-delivery system has been developed for one class, and age increasingly has been an accepted identifier for special treatment. Ideologically, despite the swing between conservative administrations that favor less government and liberal administrations that lean toward large centralized federal authority, there has been little disagreement since the 1930s that the federal government should step in whenever a social need, crisis, or problem affecting the elderly has arisen.

This modern, traditional approach has met with significant accomplishments and overall success. The poverty rate for older persons has dropped. Older persons no longer have to face the specter of the poor house, as they did up through the Great Depression. They can rely, at the very least, on Supplemental Security Income, nutrition programs and congregate senior centers. Medicare and Medicaid provide a basic level of healthcare. And the elderly have considerably greater participation in the democratic process (witness their high levels of voting and their organized interest groups).

The politics of aging, however, also is about a change in public values and attitudes about aging. Younger and middle-aged people and families increasingly realize that aging is not just about being old but about growing old and living longer. The rise of long-term care as a political and policy priority signifies the new-found awareness by families and younger groups that political and policy actions toward the elderly can have a direct impact on their own lifestyle choices, economic status and social relationships. So it can be said that the period since the 1930s has been a long, gradual evolution in the awareness by society about aging and living long.

### **The Trend Generation**

Much has been said and written about that very large group born between 1946 and 1964, the “baby boomers,” who represent the largest age group. The baby boomers are, for better or worse, a trend generation that, through its numbers, establishes new trends as it moves through the life cycle.

This trend generation will age and become, collectively, the largest group of older persons this nation will ever face. Sooner or later (probably later), members of this generation will recognize their mortality and develop a very deep interest in issues of older persons. And when that time comes, as it surely will, they will have a profound impact on the politics and policies of aging.

The future political profile of the trend generation - as it ages - requires much more understanding and analysis than this article can manage. But a close look at the questions and challenges that this generation presents is fundamental to understanding aging in the 21st century.

### **Challenges for the Future**

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century reveals a host of issues, problems and challenges that are particular to today’s elderly and to those who follow. The four most central are outlined here.

1. *A restructuring of the current system of benefits and eligibility.* The current system of public benefits and services uses an extraordinary amount of public resources. In times of serious budget deficits and limited expansion of government, the large-scale entitlement programs become very visible to those who want to reduce government expenditures. Especially now that most older persons are reasonably healthy, well educated and independent, serious consideration will be given to raising eligibility criteria and age. In addition, issues of targeting, and means-testing benefits on criteria other than age probably will occur in the near future. Those criteria may center around need and functional ability. Serious examination of the organization and financing of services to the elderly also will occur.
2. *Provision of health and long-term care coverage.* The aging of the generation born between 1910 and 1926 highlights the critical gaps in providing long-term care for a population that prefers to remain at home and in the community. Not just because older persons desperately need long-term care services, but because families with elders will realize that it is in their best interest to have those services available, and they may even be willing to pay for them through public taxation. Also important is the increasing number of Americans without any

health care coverage. If we adopt some form of comprehensive health care coverage for all Americans, regardless of age, it will help merge the political and social concerns of all generations.

3. *Accepting a multiracial and multigenerational society.* A major demographic change in the cultural and social profile of the nation will be its ethnic diversity coupled with its aging. By 2010, a large portion, perhaps a majority, of the U.S. population will be descendants of Hispanics, blacks, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. That growing cultural diversity reflects two demographic realities: growing numbers of older persons will be members of minority groups, and young minority populations will be a critical part of the labor force. The life expectancies of minorities, particularly Hispanics and Asians, are increasing at a more rapid pace than those of the non-minority population. And as they live longer, they will become a larger proportion of the elderly population. Issues of language and cultural difference, as well as racism and discrimination, will be even larger concerns early in the next century. Perhaps more revealing is the presence of growing minority groups who are relatively young. They will compose a large component of the labor force, and on them will lie the burden of maintaining productivity and economic prosperity. But if they remain a poorly trained and poorly educated group faced with serious obstacles to full participation in American social and political institutions, then the next century will see the fearful results of neglecting their well-being. This may be the last opportunity for government, the private sector, the public and the taxpayer to understand that it is in their best interest to launch a massive reinvestment in the human infrastructure (education, healthcare, job training) for those groups and to try even harder to mitigate all forms of racism, sexism, ageism and institutional discrimination.
  
4. *Preparing the population for the aging society.* The demographic revolution presents all institutions in the society - educational, political, economic, spiritual - with new realities. How do we prepare individuals, for example, to live up to 100 years and even longer, with most of that time in reasonable health? Preparing the public for the aging of society also involves resocializing younger groups to look toward the long term and to plan for a 50-, 60- and even 70- year career in the work force. It will involve educating children and young people about aging and its effect on their lives. We also will see a redefinition of what it means to be old. And here the trend generation probably will make a positive contribution. If we no longer see 65 as old and view the 60s and even the 70s as active years, we can erase the stigmas attached to aging and be better prepared politically to make fundamental changes in the current system of public benefits and services for older persons.

### **Strategies and Leadership**

Enlightened political leadership must be recreated - leadership that does not pit one group against the other, that does not perpetuate imbalances in material resources, and that does not look at the aging of the society as a phenomenon exclusive to the elderly. An aging society, with all of its complexity and inherent contradictions, requires leaders with the moral vision and political courage to speak out for solutions, regardless of how potentially unpleasant or unpopular they may be. What we cannot afford are “cults of personality” and political celebrities

who cater to our insecurities and political illusions and promise immediate palliatives. The “go it alone,” “every man for himself” attitude will not suffice if the country is to redirect its resources toward regaining economic and social excellence.

Enlightened leadership must come to terms with the prevailing politics of limitation, where we assume that we cannot help everyone and therefore, by default, leave people to fend for themselves. A politics of equity is required, wherein we attempt to respond to social problems and use government as the primary leader in devising solutions. How and when that will be done are uncertain, but the future will provide an opportunity to redirect our energies and renew a social commitment to the entire society.

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Adapted from “Aging for the Twenty-First Century: Process, Politics and Policy,” by Fernando M. Torres-Gil. *Generations*, Journal of the American Society on Aging. 12(3) pp. 5-9. Copyright 1988 ASA. (Editor’s Note: Fernando M. Torres-Gil is professor of social work, University of California, Los Angeles, and former staff director of the House Select Committee on Aging.)

**Handout****Review Questions: Aging For The Twenty-First Century**

**Directions:** Answer the following questions, based on the article “Aging for the Twenty-First Century.”

1. List three demographic trends occurring in the United States.
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
2. In your own words, what are three questions and issues society faces regarding an older population?
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
3. What happened in the 1930s that set the stage for political programs for older adults?
4. What have been some of the accomplishments of government programs for older adults?
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
5. Give an example or explain how long-term care affects families and people of all ages.
6. What characteristic of the generation born between 1946 and 1964 enables it to be a trend generation?
7. What changes in benefits and long-term care for older adults does Fernando Torres-Gil foresee?
8. In addition to aging, what other major demographic change is occurring?
9. Why is it in the best interest of an aging society to invest in the health and education of minority young people?
10. Give an example of a political position that you believe would be both unpleasant and unpopular.

## Handout

### Glossary of Terms Related to Public Policy

#### Do you know these terms?

**Entitlement programs**, unlike welfare, provide benefits regardless of income. Social Security is a public entitlement program into which all pay and are guaranteed a minimum income in old age or in disability.

**Generational equity** is a political expression which implies that entitlement programs for older adults are to blame for the difficulties of baby boomers and their children.

**Long-term care** is the kind of assistance needed for chronic disease or disability that prevents a person from taking care of himself or herself for a long time. Although many think only of nursing home care, long-term care includes adult day-care centers which offer assistance during the day when family members are away, and home health care such as walking and bathing, and chores from visiting nurses, therapists and aides.

**Means testing** refers to a process by which eligibility for government support is based on income and assets. Some suggest Social Security should be changed from a universal entitlement program to one for low-income persons only. Critics of means testing believe that people not in poverty would object to contributing to a fund just for low income persons.

**Medicaid** is a government assistance program that pays medical expenses, including the cost of nursing home and home health care, for people with limited income, and assets. Eligibility is established by each state.

**Medicare** is a federal program that provides health care coverage to people over age 65 and others who qualify based on a disability. It provides limited coverage for skilled nursing care, up to a maximum of 150 days in a skilled nursing home, and limited benefits for home health services. It is limited to short-term or acute medical needs - hospitalization, doctors' care in and out of the hospital, and other care needed for a limited time due to an injury or illness.

**Service-delivery system** refers to the network of agencies that provide services to persons. Examples of service-delivery organizations are senior centers, nutrition sites, hospitals and visiting nurse programs.

**Social Security Act**, passed in 1935, was part of President Roosevelt's New Deal legislation that provided a pension for older adults. It is based on the concept of earned rights, rather than universal eligibility, so that it is not viewed as welfare, but as a public trust into which all pay and all are guaranteed an income in old age or disability.

**Supplemental Security Income (SSI)**, formerly known as Old Age Assistance, provides income for low-income elders who are not covered adequately by Social Security. Although SSI is administered by the Social Security Administration, payments come from general funds and not from Social Security. Some states contribute to the SSI payment, which creates discrepancies in benefits from state to state.

**Trend generation** refers to the baby boom generation born between 1946 and 1964. Because of its numbers, it establishes new trends as it moves through the life cycle, influencing ideas, goods and services.

**Handout****Instructions for Interview of Older Adult**

Using the questions below, conduct an interview with a person at least 65 years of age. Feel free to add questions of your own whenever one occurs to you.

**The report of your interview should meet the following criteria:**

1. Typed and double-spaced if possible; if not possible, please write neatly in pen.
2. Include the questions in your report in a format that enables the reader to know what the person you are interviewing is referring to.
3. Discuss your personal reaction to the interview in three paragraphs at the end of your report.

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**Questions for Interview of an Older Adult**

1. Please tell me about your childhood, family and school life.
2. Do you consider yourself old? At what ages (or stages) did you notice that you were getting older?
3. What is the most important historical event or period of time that you have lived through? How did it influence you personally?
4. What is the biggest change you have seen in how people conduct their everyday lives?
5. What have been the best years of your life so far? What are your plans for the future?
6. How are young people today different from when you were their age?
7. What advice would you give young people to help them prepare for their old age?
8. Have you ever experienced any negative attitudes or discrimination because of your age? Please explain.
9. Class question. (What do you, as a class, want to know about older adults? Discuss in class and write before the interview.)
10. Student question. Based on what you've learned, ask at least one more question; what else would **you** like to know about this person's life?

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**After you describe the interview, discuss your reaction (three paragraphs).**

1. What did you learn? Did anything surprise you?
2. How did you feel during the interview?
3. What changes (if any) have occurred in your perception of older adults? (What did you think before? What do you think now?)

## Meeting Real People

### Speakers from the County Office of Aging and Older Adults in the Community

#### Contact:

The County Office of Aging  
320 North Tioga Street  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
Tel: 607- 274-5482

#### Field Trips to Local Retirement Communities:

Kendal at Ithaca ([www.kendal.org](http://www.kendal.org))  
2230 North Triphammer Road  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
Tel: 607-266-6300  
E-mail: [admissions@kal.kendal.org](mailto:admissions@kal.kendal.org)

Longview, an Ithacare Community ([www.ithaca.edu/longview](http://www.ithaca.edu/longview))  
1 Bella Vista Drive  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
Tel: 607-375-6300  
E-mail: [mstrassberg@ithaca.edu](mailto:mstrassberg@ithaca.edu)

McGraw House  
700 McGraw House  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
Tel: (607) 272-7054  
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#### **For assistance in arranging these events, feel free to contact the Gerontology Institute at Ithaca College:**

Ithaca College  
Gerontology Institute  
Center for Health Sciences  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
Tel: 607-274-1965

## Review Questions for Tompkins County Millenium Report

### Chapter 3: Health Status

1. How does this report define health? What factors contribute to an individual's health status? [pg. 2]
2. Give statistics comparing Tompkins County seniors' chronic limitations with seniors in N.Y. State. Why is there a difference? [pg. 3]
3. From highest to lowest, list those health problems that affect Tompkins County seniors. [pg. 3]
4. Between 1990 and 2010, the people between 50-59 are expected to \_\_\_\_\_. [pg. 4]
5. Describe those seniors who have the greatest difficulty obtaining needed health care services. [pg.5]
6. Define and describe social isolation in Tompkins County. [pg. 5 & 6]
7. What are three primary concerns regarding nutrition? [pg. 6 & 7]
8. List at least 3 services available for senior citizens in each of the following areas: [pgs. 7-11]
 

<u>Medical Related</u>	<u>Social Programs</u>
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

  

<u>Nutrition and/or Exercise Programs</u>
1.
2.
3.
9. Describe why getting dental care is difficult for Medicaid patients. [pg. 13]
10. Summarize at least 5 recommendations the task force made regarding health for seniors in Tompkins County. [pg. 13-14]
  - A.
  - B.
  - C.
  - D.

## Review Questions on the Tompkins County Millenium Report

### Chapter 5: Income and Employment

1. In the 1990 Census, \_\_\_\_\_ seniors were living on incomes of \_\_\_\_\_ or less and \_\_\_\_\_% of individuals 65+ were in the labor force and this figure is expected to increase as the \_\_\_\_\_ages [pg. 1]
2. For \_\_\_\_\_ individuals, Social Security represents \_\_\_\_\_% or more of all household income, while for \_\_\_\_\_ persons - \_\_\_\_\_% of seniors - it is their sole source of income. [pg. 3]
3. Describe why the three legged “stool” of income support for the elderly (Social Security, income from assets and income from pensions) is largely a myth. [pg. 4]
4. Describe two problems regarding senior use of food stamps. [pg. 5 & 6]
5. Describe Section VIII housing in Tompkins County. [pg. 6]
6. Describe two tax benefits for senior citizens. [pg. 6]
7. Define and explain how the following health care programs work. [pg. 7]
  - A. EPIC:
  - B. Medicaid:
  - C. Medicare:
  - D. F.I.S.E.P.:
8. Describe the relationship between the wealth & health of senior citizens. [pg. 8]
9. Describe the fear and anxiety among the elderly regarding changes in Social Security and Medicare. [pg. 9]
10. Explain two reasons there will be more 65+ year olds working in the future. [pg. 12 &13]
11. Explain two reasons elderly women are more likely to be poor than elderly men. [pg. 13&14]
12. Describe two ways that age discrimination occurs. [pg. 14]

## **Review Questions for the Tompkins County Millenium Report**

### **Chapter 6: Leisure and Volunteerism**

1. What is a difficulty seniors have regarding teaming about recreational opportunities in Tompkins County? [pg. 3]
2. What are the results of the 1995 County Office for the Aging Needs Assessment? [pg. 4]
3. Based on the report (pg. 8), what is one of the reasons seniors do not regularly participate in fitness activities? [pg. 8]
4. How can socialization for seniors be improved after they leave the workplace? [pg. 4]
5. What is one of the main disadvantages of the educational opportunities in Tompkins County? [pg. 6]
6. There are a variety of statistics available concerning seniors volunteering; what do they indicate? [pg. 8]
7. How will retired baby boomers be different from previous senior volunteers? [pg. 8-9]
8. What are five issues, needs or highlights for seniors? [pg.13-15]
  - A.
  - B.
  - C.
  - D.
  - E.
9. Choose three action recommendations that you think are the best to help seniors. Explain your reason for choosing each of your three choices. [pg. 10-15]
10. Why does this task force consider leisure activities and volunteer opportunities a high priority for seniors?

## Student Position Paper Assignment

### Is Tompkins County Caring for It's Oldest Citizens?

**Directions:** Based on what you have read, heard and seen, write a position paper, 1-1/2 to 3 pages long, typed or in pen, which covers the following:

- I. At least 3 accurate important generalizations about aging in the 21st century in the U.S.
- II. For each of the 3 areas we covered in class about Tompkins County and it's oldest citizens – one positive and one that needs improvement:
  - a) Health status
  - b) Income and employment
  - c) Leisure and volunteerism
- III. Your own position. What have you learned, what do you think needs to be done and what more do you want to learn about aging?