



# **LESSON PLANS ON AGING ISSUES:**

*Creative Ways to Meet Social Studies Standards*

## **Global History**

### **WHY IS WORLD AGING AN IMPORTANT ISSUE?**

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

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## **Why is World Aging an Important Issue?**

### **Introduction**

This lesson can stand alone as an introduction to the issue of aging and the role it plays in governmental decision making. It can also be used as a follow up to the student worksheet activities of the Changing World Population lesson. The lesson begins with general discussion about the importance of population structures in a country. (The term population structure refers to the percentage of the population that falls into different age groups.) Students then use the facts about the population structures in two countries to discuss the implications for the future of those societies. The teacher should choose two countries, one with an aging population, e.g. Japan or Western Europe, and one with a young population, e.g. Kenya. (Graphs listing the countries in each category follow.) The lesson concludes with a return to the general question about the effect of population structure on societies.

### **Objectives**

Students will:

- Understand how policy makers in a society make decisions based on the population structure
- Study the population structure and related political/economic systems of two countries

### **Materials**

Handout: Introduction to an Aging World

Handout: Graphs of countries sorted according to aging populations and young populations  
(Teachers and/or students can choose the two countries to be compared)

### **Key Terms**

life expectancy, median age, population structure, age ratio, population projections, population pyramid, capitalism, socialism, democracy, monarchy, dictatorship

### **Lesson Steps**

1. Have the students read (for homework or in class) the handout article, "Introduction to an Aging World". Then pose the question:
  - What difference does it make if the population is "old" or "young"?
  - Why do government policy makers care about population structure?

Write students' ideas on the board.

2. Distribute the graph with countries sorted by population age. Suggest two examples for investigation, e.g. Japan with its high proportion of people over 65 and Kenya with a very small proportion over 65. Substitute any two countries.

Have students research the population structures and related facts about the countries. Internet access for students during this project is ideal; alternatively, the teacher should provide background information on the countries chosen. An INTERNET search using the name of the country and the word “demographics” will usually provide useful web sites.

Questions the students should answer:

- What % of people in the country are over 65?
- What % of people in the country are over 80?
- What % of people in the country are under 15?
- What is the average life expectancy in the country?
- What is the median age in the country today?
- What is the birth rate in the country today?
- What is the death rate in the country today?
- What is the population projection for the year 2030?
- What percent of the population will be over 65 in the year 2030?

Other issues that students might want to consider:

- What political system exists in each country? Democracy? Monarchy? Dictatorship?
- What economic system exists in each country? Capitalist? Socialist? Hybrid?
- What are the gender roles in each country?
- What kind of health care system is in place?

3. Divide students into groups of four and have them discuss the question, “how are these countries different”. What impact does the age structure have on government policy and future planning in the two countries?

How can these two very different societies prepare for their future in terms of

- the labor force
  - the educational system
  - the role of the family and its members
  - the health care system
  - immigration laws
  - other ideas offered by students
4. Bring the class together again. Have each group share their discussion briefly. Then go back to the student responses on the board from step 1 and ask students to add the new ideas that emerged during the discussion.

### **Extension Activities**

- Have students write a paper or do a presentation on one of the following questions:
  - a. Do you think “old age” affects men and women the same?
  - b. What about differences in social and economic class?
  - c. Do all societies treat older people the same?

- Have students provide examples.
- **This discussion of age, gender and social class can be used as an introduction and framework of themes for the global studies curriculum. Point out to the student that in studying countries around the world, these themes will always be important to consider.**

**Handout:****Introduction to An Aging World**

The United Nations designated 1999 as “The Year of the Older Person,” thereby recognizing what demographers and many others have known for decades: our global population is aging, and aging at a very fast rate. Fertility decline and the growth of city life have been the dominant global demographic trends during the second half of the twentieth century, much as rapid improvements in life expectancy characterized the early 1900s. As we begin the twenty-first century, population aging will emerge as an important worldwide phenomenon. **Lower birth rates and lower death rates because of improved health care have resulted in growing numbers of older people throughout most of the world.** As education and income levels rise, increasing numbers of individuals reach “old age”. These old people expect much more from their lives than old people of previous generations.

Population aging represents, in one sense, a human success story; societies now have the luxury of aging. However, the steady, sustained growth of elderly populations also poses challenges to policy makers in many societies. **After the year 2010, the numbers and proportions of elderly, especially the oldest old, will rise rapidly in most developed and many developing countries. The projected increase is primarily the result of high fertility after World War II.** It is secondarily, but increasingly, the result of reduced death rates at all ages; in most nations of the world, there have been major reductions in the prevalence of infectious and parasitic diseases, declines in infant and maternal mortality, and improved nutrition during the 1900s.

Most people, for good reason, associate the growth of elderly populations with the developed, industrialized countries of Europe and North America. Most developed nations have the oldest populations in the world today, and some may have more grandparents than children before the middle of the twenty-first century. The developing world, by contrast, still has a high proportion of children (35 percent under age 15) and a relatively low proportion of older people (10 percent aged 55 and over).

What is less widely appreciated is that absolute numbers of elderly in developing nations often are large and everywhere are increasing. Well over half of the world’s elderly (people aged 65 and over) now live in developing nations (59 percent or 249 million people, in 2000). By 2030, this proportion is projected to increase to 71 percent (868 million). Many developing countries have had or are now experiencing a significant downturn in their rate of natural population increase (births minus deaths) similar to what previously occurred in most industrialized nations. As this process accelerates, age structures (the number of people in each age group) will change. The elderly will be an ever-larger proportion of each nation’s total population. Elderly populations also have grown because of worldwide improvements in health services, educational status, and economic development.

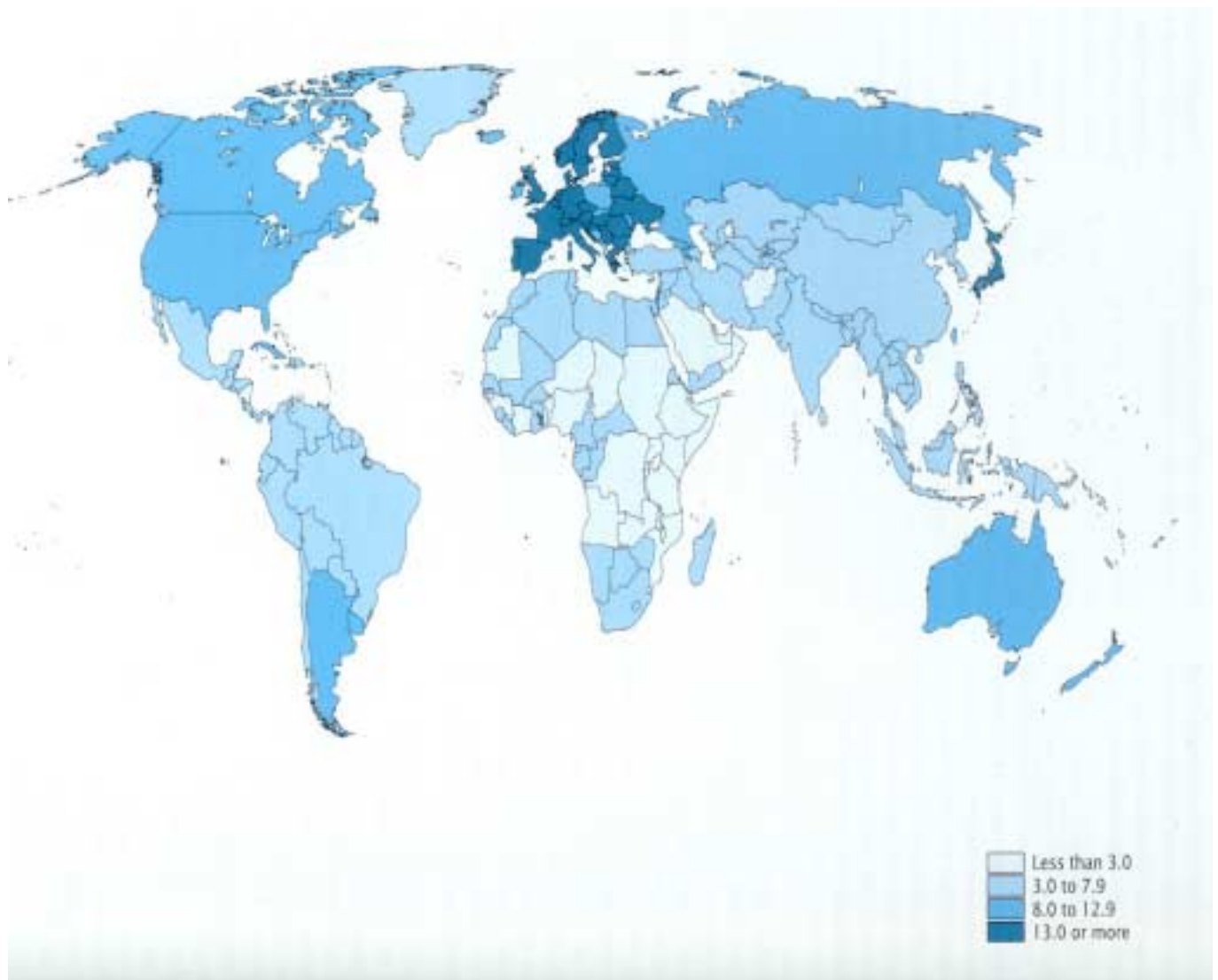
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Adapted from *An Aging World: 2001*, U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a.

As is true of younger age groups, people aged 65 and over have very different economic resources, health statuses, living arrangements and levels of community involvement. There are important demographic, social and economic differences that have direct bearing on social policy now and in the future. For example, the fastest growing portion of the elderly population in many nations are those aged 80 and over, referred to as the oldest old. Rapidly expanding numbers of very old people represent a social phenomenon without historical precedent, and one that is bound to alter previously held stereotypes of older people. **The growth of the oldest old is important to public policy because needs and social responsibilities of people change considerably as they age.**

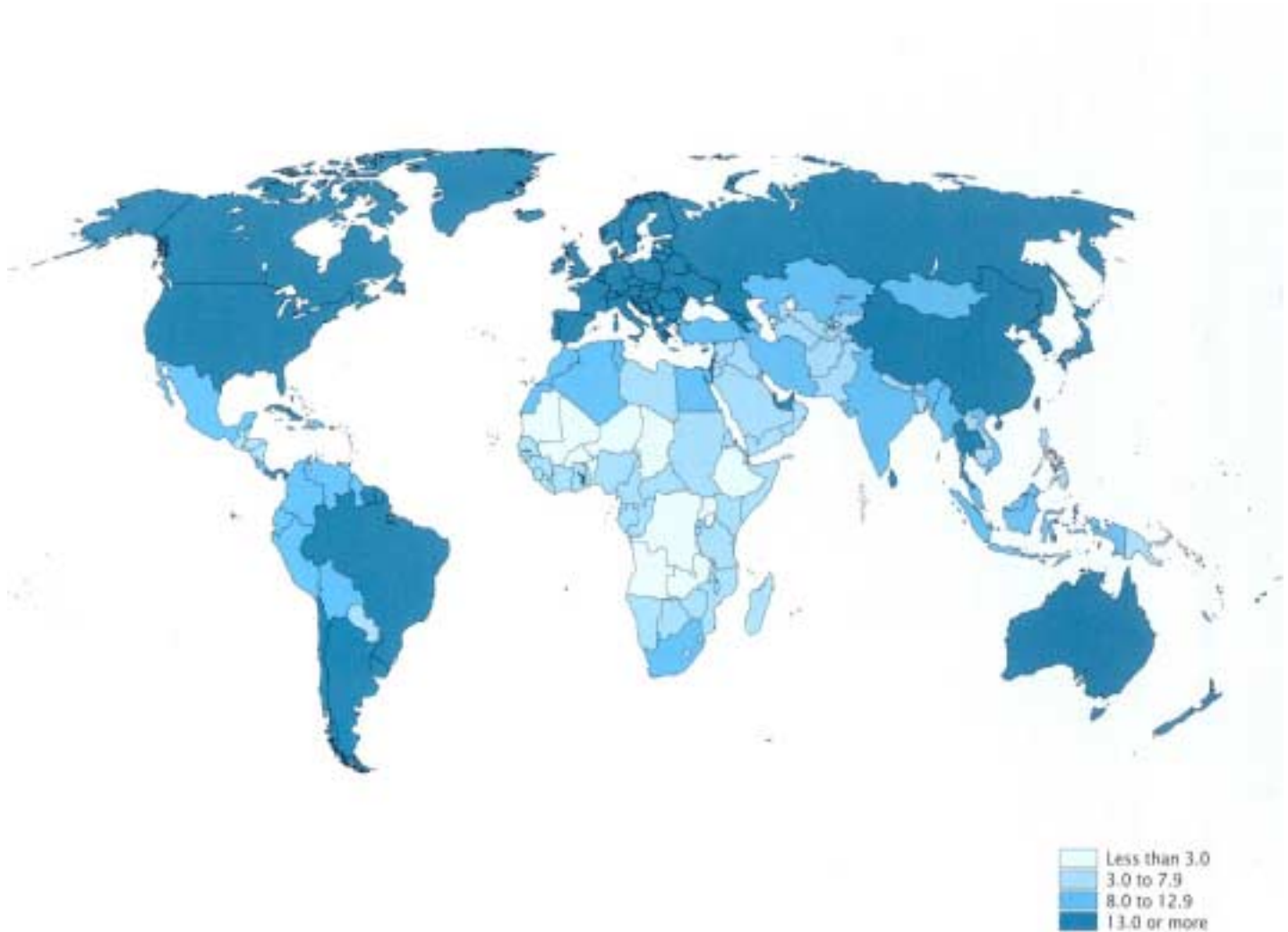
We are all part of an increasingly interdependent and aging world. See the map below.

### Percent Aged 65 and Over: 2000



Current growth of elderly populations is steady in some countries and explosive in others. When the World War II baby-boomers in many countries begin to reach their elder years after 2010, there will be a significant jump in the proportion of the world's population that is elderly. See the map below.

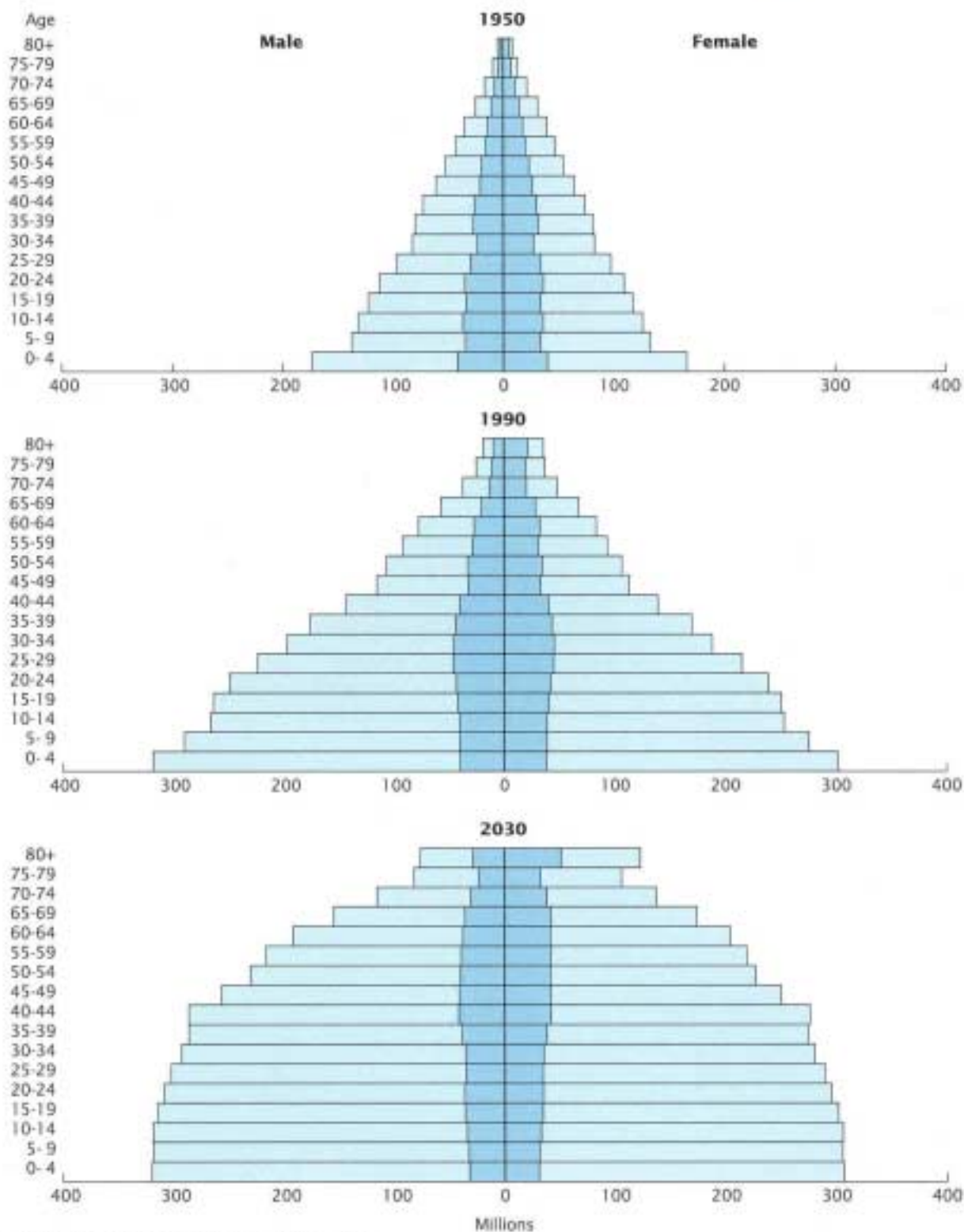
### Percent Aged 65 and Over: 2030



**The coming growth, especially of the oldest old, will be stunning. As their numbers grow, there is a serious need to understand the characteristics of older populations, their strengths, and their requirements.** The effects will be felt not just within individual nations but throughout the global economy. Understanding the dynamics of aging requires accurate descriptions of the elderly from interrelated perspectives including demographic, social, economic, medical and increasingly, biologic and genetic.

## Population by Age and Sex: 1950, 1990, and 2030

■ Developing countries  
■ Developed countries



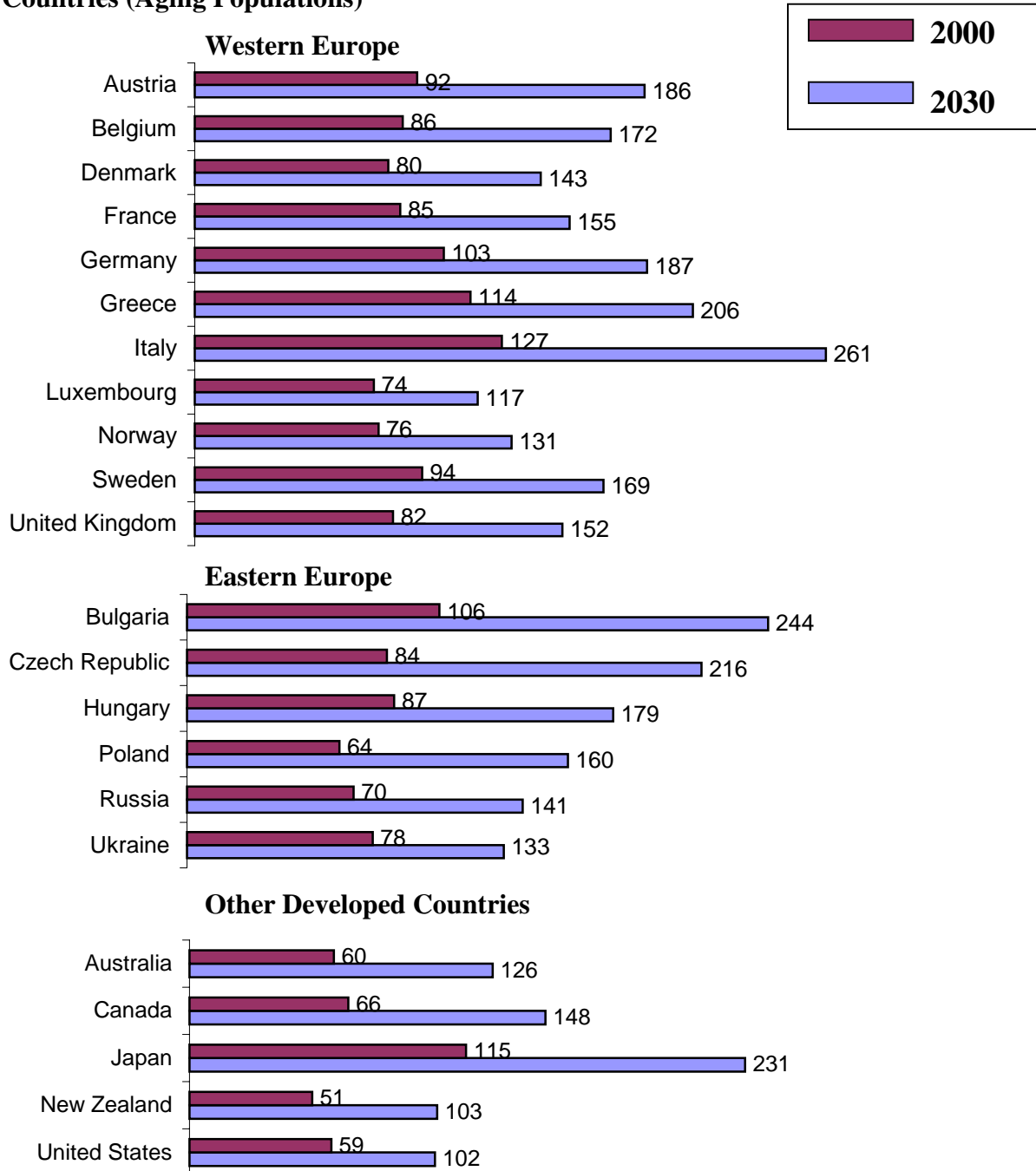
Sources: United Nations, 1999 and U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a.

**Handout:****Choosing Countries for Comparison**

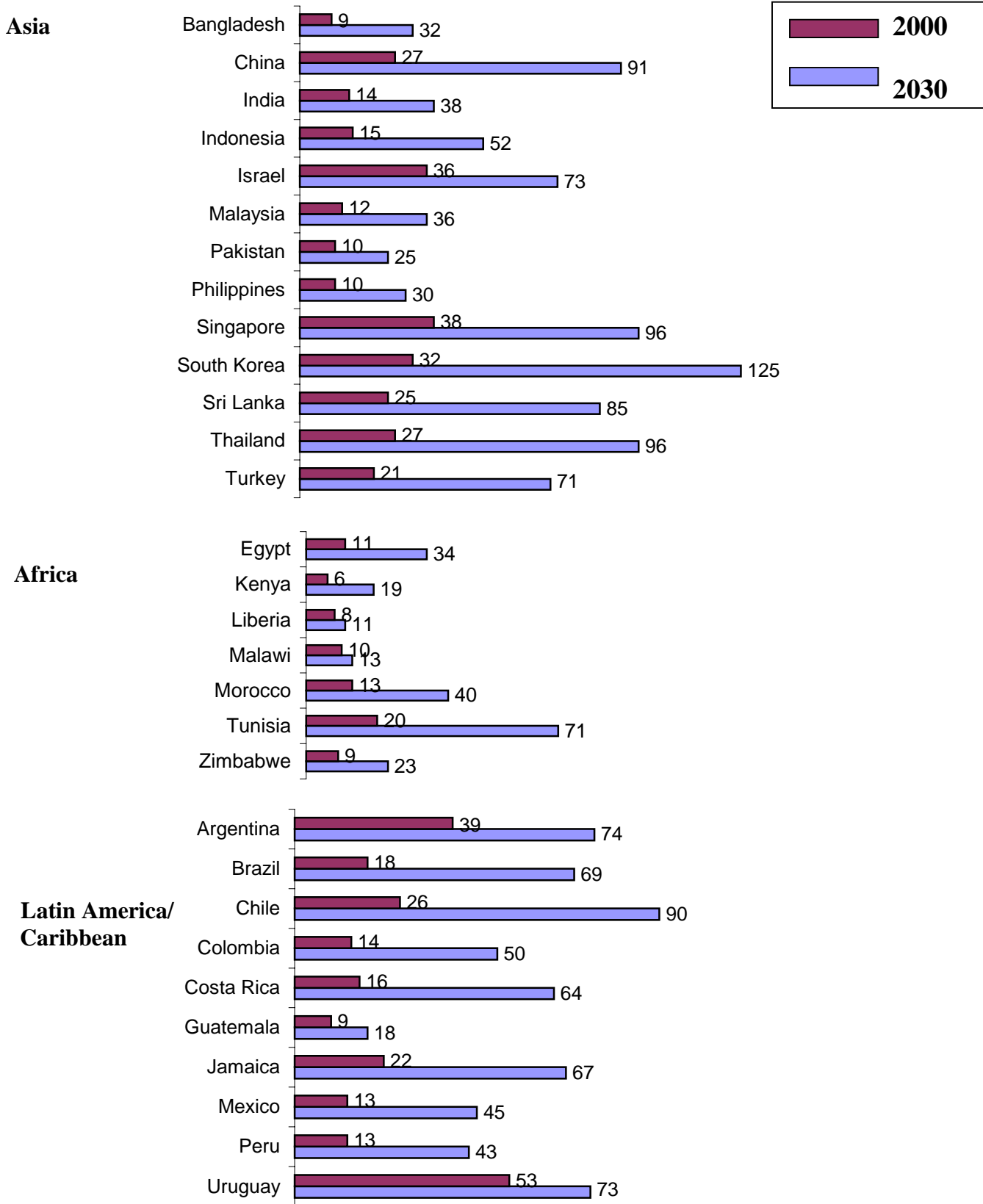
The countries on this page all have a large aging population. Austria, for example, has 92 people who are over 65 for every 100 people who are 14 or younger. Countries on the next page all have young populations. Bangladesh, for example, has 9 people over 65 for every 100 people who are 14 or younger. Pick one country from each list. Find more information about its population structure, and consider the issues the government decision makers will have to address.

**Aging Index: 2000 and 2030**

(people aged 65 and over per 100 people aged 0-14)

**Developed Countries (Aging Populations)**

**Developing Countries (Young Populations)**



Source: *An Aging World: 2001*, U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a.