



The demography of ageing around the world

Fast-moving global trends towards greater numbers of elderly people living alone present colossal implications for health and welfare services.

The increasing world population

The world population has more than doubled in the last half-century. In 1950, there were a mere two and a half billion people in the world. By 1960 this had grown to three billion, four by 1975, five by the late 1980s, and is now rapidly approaching six billion. Some time in the next century the world population should reach ten billion. The first five billion took at least 50,000 years; the second is taking only 50.

The present increase is taking place overwhelmingly in the continents of Asia and Africa.

This growth has come about through fewer babies dying and adults living longer. Life expectancy has increased significantly. But how long someone lives depends in great part on where they live. Life expectancy in Japan is 81 for women and 76 for men; in Sierra Leone it is less than half that.

More elderly people

In 1995 it was estimated that 371 million people (6% of the world's population) were over the age of 65. This proportion is much higher in Europe (14%) and North America (13%) than in Latin America and Asia (5%) and Africa (3%).

The older portion of the population is predominantly female; 57% of all over-65s. In the developed world this figure is a higher percentage. Whereas numbers of elderly women and men are roughly equal in Africa, in Europe and America there are three elderly women to two elderly men, probably due to the greater political and financial power of European and American women. Given women's greater capacity for self-care, the task of caring

for elderly people is reduced by this differential survival rate.

The ageing of the elderly population

A strong feature of the growth of the elderly population, with considerable implications for dementia, is that increasing survival beyond 65 means that the percentage of the elderly who are in their 80s is growing all the time.

Figures for selected countries illustrate this from both the developed and the developing world, and large and small countries.

	Population (m)	% aged 65+	% of those aged 65+		
			65-74	75-84	85+
Sweden	9	17.6	53.9	35.6	10.5
USA	257	12.7	56.8	32.9	10.3
UK	58	15.7	55.8	33.9	10.2
Japan	124	13.0	60.0	32.1	7.9
Kazakhstan	17	6.0	60.3	32.2	7.5
China	1130	5.6	70.5	25.8	3.7

Urbanisation

Significant growth in the number of people living in cities began in the last century in what is now the developed world. Today it is affecting every country.

In Burkina Faso, West Africa, for example, the percentage of the population that lives in towns doubled during the 1980s from one in ten to one in five. In China, the growth was rather slower, from one in five to one in four. But the raw numbers are impressive, from 206 million to 296 million. This means that China's urban population is growing at the rate of over ten million people every year. Much of this growth is due to young people moving away from agricultural villages. Elderly people are left behind, and many become lonely and isolated.

The fragmentation of families

The number of elderly people who live in the same household as their children has been declining in every country which records these figures. In Denmark, Sweden and Holland the figure is now below one in ten. Decline is taking place even in those countries such as Japan which have a strong tradition of filial piety. Living in nuclear family units is becoming increasingly the norm. More ready acceptance of divorce weakens families further and may reduce the ties between elderly people and their adult children.

The elderly living alone

Increasingly, the elderly are left on their own. This is another trend found around the world, but most pronounced in northern Europe. Over half the elderly people in Denmark live on their own, over 40% in Germany and Sweden, and between 30% to 40% in most Western countries. This trend is commoner among women and, in most developed countries, among the elderly. It represents a huge social change which has taken place at high speed. In the United Kingdom, for example, at the end of the Second World War, only one in eight elderly people lived alone. Now the figure is one in three. As a general rule, elderly people in Western societies value their independence and regard both sharing with their children and institutional care as inferior outcomes to continuing to live in their own home. If these trends appear throughout the developing world, as seems likely, the implications for health and welfare services will be colossal.

Bibliography

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Alzheimer's Disease International would like to thank Bernard Ineichen PhD, European Institute of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Surrey, UK, for his help in preparing this factsheet.



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