An Evolving Public

Dynamic transformation in the U.S. demographic landscape over the next quarter-century

Current Trend

The United States (U.S.) stands at the threshold of major demographic changes due to complex social, economic, immigration, education, and technological factors. The population is becoming more diverse, older, more educated, and more concentrated. By 2060, the racial and age composition of the U.S. is projected to change, with over 50% of Americans identifying as a race other than White[1] and roughly 23% being age 65 and over.[2] Urban areas—defined as densely developed residential, commercial, and other nonresidential areas—now account for over 80% of the U.S. population and this figure is expected to rise.[3] Urban growth near wildlands and floodplains will continue to be a central factor in understanding future climate risk.

In parallel, the U.S. grapples with far-reaching cultural, ideological, and economic changes that reverberate throughout society. These shifts, marked by high levels of distrust in government institutions and the rampant spread of misinformation, challenge the foundations of governance and resource distribution, creating a need for innovative approaches to bridge divides and restore public trust.

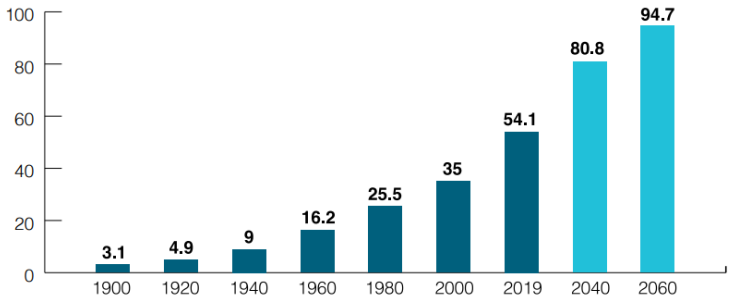
Implications

The repercussions of climate change and rapidly evolving demographics are manifesting across geographies and sectors. An aging population may require unique considerations for disaster

Key Facts

- Between 2014 and 2060, the U.S. population is projected to increase from 319 million to 417 million, reaching 400 million in 2051.
- Growing hazard risk is projected to disproportionately impact Black communities.
- The number of Americans 65 and older is projected to nearly double from 49 million in 2016 to 95 million by 2060.
- More than 80% of Americans do not trust the government to consistently 'do what is right.'

Number of Persons Age 65 and Older, 1900 - 2060 (numbers in millions)



Note: Increments in years are uneven. Lighter bars (2040 and 2060) indicate projections.

[1] Demographic Turning Points for the United Sates: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060 (census.gov)
[2] Fact Sheet: Aging in the United States | PRB; Graphic: 2020 Profile of Older Americans (acl.gov)
[3] United States - Urbanization 2020 | Statista
Key Facts: Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S: 2014-2060 (census.gov); Inequitable patterns of US flood risk in the Anthropocene (Nature Climate Change); Demographic Turning Points for the United Sates: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060 (census.gov); Public Trust in Government: 1958-2023 | Pew Research Center.

This document is one part of FEMA's Strategic Foresight 2050 initiative, which seeks to anticipate and understand future possibilities to enhance long-term decision-making.

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response and recovery, while immigration can inject new and different perspectives into the fabric of a community. Increasing population density in coastal areas and the wildland-urban interface (WUI)[4] compounds growing risk in these geographies. Historic social vulnerability will additionally contribute to disproportionate impacts of increasing hazards. Meanwhile, mistrust in government is on the rise, threatening the future effectiveness of federal intervention.

Demographic Shifts Present Challenges and Opportunities

In an era marked by profound shifts in population composition, aging represents not only a demographic trend but also a social, economic, and healthcare challenge of immense significance. As the elderly population grows, so does the number of older adults who may have limited mobility, chronic health conditions, or other vulnerabilities. During disasters, this demographic group is often at a higher risk of injury or illness while the healthcare system is simultaneously overtaxed with a surge in demand for medical resources. As such, building community resilience and strengthening partnerships is increasingly essential. While many older adults reside in long-term care facilities or assisted living communities, about 27% of older Americans live alone.[5] This necessitates engaging and training neighbors, caregivers, and local organizations to assist older adults during and after disasters.

From the vantage point of emergency management, immigration presents a counterbalancing force against the challenges posed by an aging population. The increase of immigrant populations injects new energy, innovation, and perspectives into our communities,[6] strengthening our collective ability to respond to disasters and crises. Immigrants often bring unique skills, languages, and cultural knowledge, enhancing our capacity to communicate and collaborate effectively during emergencies. Moreover, they expand the workforce available for critical functions and services across their community.[7] Therefore, as we address the implications of an aging demographic in emergency management, it is essential to leverage the benefits immigration can have on the diversity and resilience of our communities.

Geography of Growing Population Density Compounds Challenges

Significant population growth in urban areas results in congestion, constrained evacuation routes, dense infrastructure, and poverty, all of which magnify the vulnerability of these areas from an emergency management perspective. This confluence is exacerbated by the increased pace in which Americans are moving to coastal counties or developing in wildfire prone areas.

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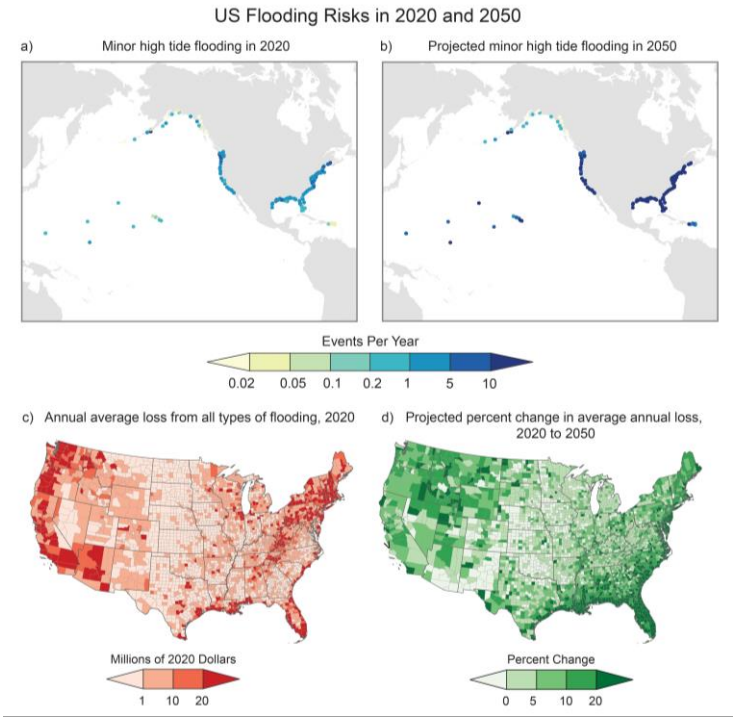
[4] The WUI is the zone of transition between unoccupied land and human development. It is the line, area, or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels.

[5] 2020 Profile of Older Americans (acl.gov)

[6] Are Immigrants More Innovative? Evidence from Entrepreneurs (census.gov)

[7] New Immigration Data Point to Larger U.S. Workforce Issues (forbes.com)

From 1990 to 2015, both the number of houses within wildfire perimeters and destroyed by wildfire doubled due to a combination of housing growth and more burned area.[8] Most exposed houses were in the WUI. Today, close to one-third of the American population live in the WUI and that share is expected to increase, given that the vast majority of the WUI is still undeveloped.[9]



The intersection of increasing coastal concentration and America's climate outlook is similarly concerning. Sea level rise will create a profound shift in coastal flooding over the next 30 years by causing tide and storm surge heights to increase and reach further inland. Sea level along the U.S. coastline is projected to rise, on average, 10-12 inches in the next 30 years. As such, by 2050, "moderate" (typically damaging) flooding is expected to occur, on average, more than 10 times as often as it does today and can be intensified by local factors. "Major" (often destructive) flooding is expected to occur five times as often in 2050 as it does today. [10] A study published in Nature Climate Change underscores that climate change is elevating the risk of flooding, with population growth serving as a key driver.[11]

Social Vulnerability Amplifies Risk

Vulnerability to increasing fire and flood risk in high-density communities is amplified by social and economic factors. The same Nature Climate Change study found that increasing flood risk will disproportionately impact Black communities. Census tracts with the highest proportion of Black Americans are expected to see twice as much risk increase compared to those with the lowest proportion of Black Americans. In parallel, communities with lower income levels face fundamental challenges when it comes to emergency management. Emergency management activities require substantial funding to maintain preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities. This includes investments in training, equipment, communication systems, and the establishment of emergency shelters. In areas with higher income rates, increased property values and a larger tax-paying population can provide a robust revenue stream to support these essential functions. However, in less affluent communities, there may be fewer resources available, hindering capacity to adequately prepare for and respond to emergencies. At the individual scale, research has shown that people

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[8] Rising wildfire risk to houses in the United States, especially in grasslands and shrublands

[9] Wildland Urban Interface (fema.gov)

[10] Graphic: Fifth National Climate Assessment (globalchange.gov) (a, b) Adapted from Sweet et al. 2022; (c, d) adapted from Wing et al. 2022

[11] Inequitable patterns of US flood risk in the Anthropocene (Nature Climate Change)

with low socioeconomic status often struggle to afford disaster preparedness measures like insurance or home improvements, making them less likely to evacuate in response to warnings and more likely to suffer long-term impacts following a hazardous event.[12]

The overlap of increasingly risk-prone geographies, growing population density, and socioeconomic vulnerability require the emergency management enterprise to develop substantive approaches to mitigating worst-case scenarios. Funding and incentivizing relocation, investing in hazard-resilient infrastructure, expanding the use of innovative nature-based solutions, and implementing place-based technical assistance are among the strategies and tools the field will need to consider in building towards resilience for the whole of community. Furthermore, socioeconomic implications in particular highlight the importance of environmental justice planning in preparing for a future emergency landscape.

Growing Mistrust of Government

Public trust in government has steadily declined since the turn of the century, with 2023 marking a near record low in Americans "trusting the federal government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time."[13] Recent research suggests that Gen Z, or those born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, mistrust most social and political institutions.[14] Growing abundance and sophistication of misinformation may amplify this trend, contributing to a culture of universal skepticism.

Higher levels of governmental mistrust may lead residents to discredit official guidance, warnings, and evacuation orders issued by government agencies. Some individuals may be less likely to heed these warnings and engage in disaster preparedness activities such as emergency planning, stockpiling supplies, or participating in drills. This lack of preparedness can leave these communities more vulnerable when disasters strike, as they may not have the resources or knowledge needed to effectively respond to emergencies. Additionally, mistrust may hinder cooperation between community members and local authorities. Residents may be less likely to report emergencies, provide information to authorities, or participate in relief efforts. This lack of collaboration can slow down response and recovery efforts and lead to gaps in disaster management.

While mistrust in government grows, more than 70% of Americans additionally feel that interpersonal confidence has worsened over the past 20 years. A majority classify this degradation of trust as a "very important" problem, suggesting widespread support of steadying interpersonal ties.[15] Improved neighbor-to-neighbor trust could support emergency management objectives if public-led coalitions foster buy-in to safety and preparedness initiatives.

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[12] Greater Impact: How Disasters Affect People of Low Socioeconomic Status (samhsa.gov)

[13] Public Trust in Government: 1958-2023 | Pew Research Center

[14] Gen Z Voices Lackluster Trust in Major U.S. Institutions (gallup.com)

[15] Americans' trust in other Americans | Pew Research Center

Signals of Change

Older People Suffer the Most in Climate Disasters. We Need to Plan and Prepare for That
https://www.governing.com/climate/older-people-suffer-the-most-in-climate-disasters-we-need-to-plan-and-prepare-for-that

Aging Is the Real Population Bomb
https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/Series/Analytical-Series/aging-is-the-real-population-bomb-bloom-zucker

Population in the US: as small towns shrink, is immigration the answer?
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/18/population-in-the-us-as-small-towns-shrink-is-immigration-the-answer

Racial disparities are working against disaster recovery for people of color. Climate change could make it worse
https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/14/us/racial-disparities-disaster-recovery-iyw-rd/index.html

Gen Z Voices Lackluster Trust in Major U.S. Institutions
https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/510395/gen-voices-lackluster-trust-major-institutions.aspx