



AT-A-GLANCE INSIGHTS

PUBLIC POLICY & AGING REPORT SYNOPSIS

A recent issue of the Gerontological Society of America's (GSA) *Public Policy & Aging Report (PP&AR)* features papers related to a range of policies and programs that influence older peoples' health and well-being and highlight the opportunities and challenges for federal and state governments to address these concerns. In this issue's introductory article, Lepore and McMullen (2025) note the importance of state and federal policy action to support a growing demographic of older people. The issue aims to spark a broad discussion of ways to address the physical, cognitive, financial, occupational, and social health and wellness of older people with non-ageist, structural, programmatic, and research initiatives that support healthy aging for all of us. The authors point out that policymakers must recognize the "differences in aging across communities, including rural and urban contexts, and communities with different levels of social vulnerability" (Lepore & McMullen, 2025, p. 1).

HEALTH, WELL-BEING, AND POPULATION AGING: POLICY AND PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Rural Population Health and Aging

While rural America is essential to U.S. food and energy supply, its population is aging rapidly and experiencing health and population declines (Monnat, 2025). Older age counties—those in which more than 20% of the population are aged 65 years and older—are overwhelmingly in rural locations. Rural older people are sicker and die younger than their urban counterparts, and rural locations lose many younger people to out-migration. And while some rural locations are destinations for retirees because of the natural environment, those communities face housing, health care, and service access challenges and environmental pressures. Rural America is "facing increased demand for health care and older adult services" at a time when working-age adults are "disappearing from the labor force" (Monnat, 2025, p. 6).

Policy Actions

- ✓ To improve access to health care in rural America, stabilize the availability of Medicaid funds to support rural access hospitals, Federally Qualified Health Centers, and rural health clinics.
- ✓ Nudge healthier food and lifestyle choices with upstream interventions such as deterring smoking, alcohol, and high sugar consumption with increased taxes.
- ✓ Given the direct correlation between education and health, support access to quality primary, high school, college, and vocational education for rural residents of all ages and incentivize returning to rural areas after college with employment opportunities.

Social Vulnerability and Opioid Use Disorder

Yang and Shoff (2025) explore the relationship between opioid use disorder (OUD) among older people and the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI), a classification index that considers a community's ability to manage stress associated with "natural and manmade emergencies" (p. 11). Despite policy interventions such as Medicare screening, drug monitoring, and OUD treatment programs, OUD among older people has increased for several reasons, including susceptibility to certain physiological conditions that cause pain. Yang and Shoff also suggest that current OUD metrics may reflect the baby boomer generation's "prior experiences with substance use, the health care system, and social changes that continue into older adulthood" (p. 10). High SVI communities may lack the access to health care, transportation, and other services and supports to prevent or address OUD in older people.

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The authors found that older adult OUD increases with SVI quartiles and that the most vulnerable counties experienced the greatest increase, particularly those counties with higher percentages of the young-old (ages 65–74 years).

Policy Actions

- ✓ Given the relationship between high opioid dispensing rates and high SVI, increase educational programs for both provider and patient audiences and focus on symptom recognition and nonopioid treatment.
- ✓ Support the availability of medications for OUD (MOUD) and encourage state adoption of removing the special waiver required to prescribe buprenorphine.
- ✓ Incentivize providers in the use of screening, brief intervention, and referral to treatment (SBIRT) services as a way to reduce death and disability.

Building Healthy Brains and Lifespan Aging Education

Social policies have an important role in supporting healthy brains into later life. An age-integrated policy perspective that considers a range of productive activities—education, work, caregiving, and civic engagement—across the lifespan highlights opportunities for further research on how updated social structures can support cognitive wellness as we age (Gonzales et al., 2025).

Policy Actions

- ✓ Increase support for and scale up intergenerational programming to achieve health benefits for both younger and older people.
- ✓ Extend federal age discrimination laws to protect older adults for their entire working lives.

Workforce Development for Older Adults

As longevity increases and work sectors experience labor shortages, older people, employers, and communities can all benefit from targeted older adult workforce development (WFD) programs. Older adult labor participation has increased steadily in recent decades and is expected to continue rising for the 65–74 and 75 years and older age groups.

Policy Actions

- ✓ Incentivize and fund community service organizations in the design and implementation of older adult WFD programs that meet older adult, employer, and community needs.
- ✓ Disseminate research findings on workplace ageism and teach employers how to recognize and address ageist attitudes and behaviors.

Wrap-Up Message: Opportunities and Challenges in Aging Policy

There are both opportunities and challenges in the complex policy options that face state and federal governments as our population experiences increased longevity. Given the dynamic nature of service delivery systems and the regional differences, articles in this issue of PP&AR offer key policy lessons and recommendations for meaningful policy action.

National Academy on an Aging Society

As a nonpartisan public policy institute, the Academy actively conducts and compiles research on issues related to population aging and provides information to the public, the press, policymakers, and the academic community.

Gerontological Society of America (GSA)

GSA is dedicated to promoting interdisciplinary aging research and education to drive innovations in policy and practice. As a professional society, GSA envisions a world where meaningful lives are achievable for all as we age.