

With the aging of baby boomers, America's older population will double by 2030, reaching 70 million.

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WASHINGTON — The number of Americans age 65 or older increased tenfold in the last century and the elderly are living longer, in more comfort and in better health than ever before, researchers report.

But up to one in four elderly Americans, by some measures, is not sharing equally in this better life, according to a report being released Thursday that summarizes data from nine federal agencies.

"People are living longer and living more of their life in better health than before," said Richard Suzman, an expert at the National Institute on Aging, the lead agency in assembling the report.

The challenge, he said, is to keep up that trend of improvement and to spread the benefits more equally among all races and ethnic groups.

Suzman said the report will help policy-makers brace for the old-age arrival of the baby boomers, a population wave that will create "an enormous stretch" of society's health and elder care services.

The study, "Older Americans 2000: Key Indicators of Well-Being," compiles for the first time statistics from various agencies "to provide a unified picture of the overall health and well-being of older Americans," said Katherine Wallman, chief statistician of the Office of Management and Budget.

"I see a very positive picture, but clearly problems do remain," said Dr. Edward Sondik, the director of the National Center for Health Statistics.

Included in the 128-page report are statistics of 31 key indicators selected to portray the lives and lifestyles of older Americans. Suzman said that such information will be updated periodically and used to help shape federal services for the elderly in the future.

Among the findings:

- There are approximately 35

million people in the United States age 65 or older, accounting for about 13 percent of the total population. In 1900, the number of older Americans was about 1 million.

- With the aging of baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, America's older population will double by 2030, reaching some 70 million.

- Life expectancy for Americans age 65 in 2000 is 18 years, on average. In 1900, 65-year-olds could expect to live, on average, another 12 years.

- In 1998, women accounted

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for 58 percent of those over 65 and 70 percent of those 85 or older. About 41 percent of the older women live alone.

- From 1959 to 1998, the percentage of older Americans living in poverty declined from 35 percent to 11 percent.

- The median net worth in households headed by older people increased from 1984 to 1999 by 70 percent, but there is a startling disparity between races. In 1999, the median net worth in households headed by older black people was \$13,000, compared with \$181,000 for older white householders.

- The rate of chronic disability among older Americans declined from 24 percent in 1982 to 21 percent in 1994.

- About 4 percent of the population 65 and older, some 1.46 million people, were in nursing homes in 1997. About 192 out of every 1,000 people aged 85 or older were in nursing homes in 1997. The rate for this group in 1985 was 220 per 1,000.

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