

County Life Expectancy Lags

Laurence F. Jones and Kenneth L. Stewart

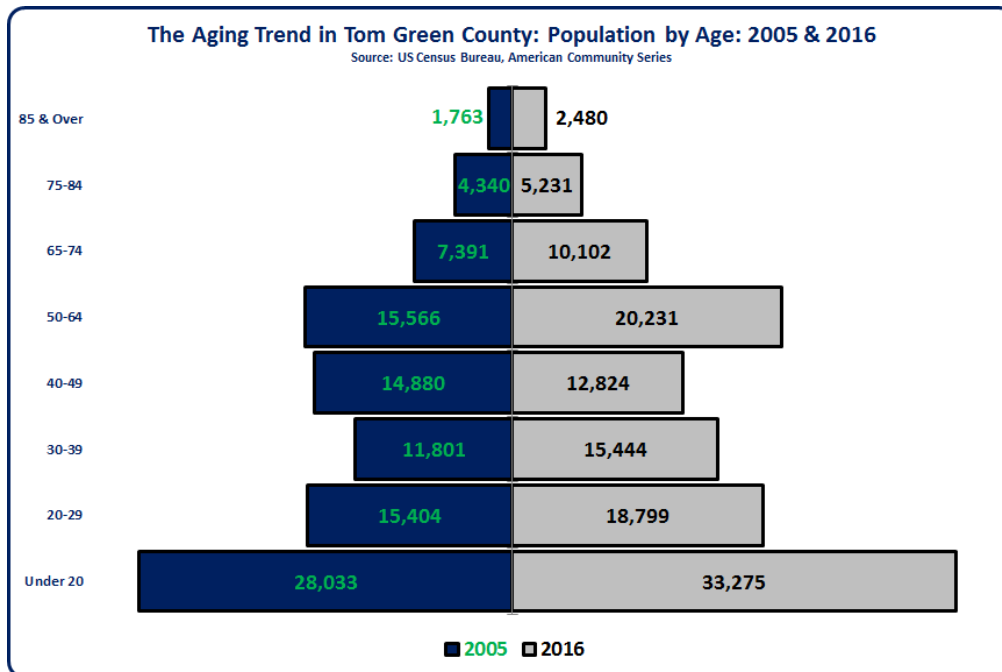
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“Better than Botox: Takes ten years off your face in just ten minutes.” This is an example of the type of “anti-aging” product advertisement that fills newspaper and magazine advertising space while driving the idea that it is better to look, feel, and be younger.

However, these messages do not tell the whole story of what it means to age. Being a senior and associating with seniors can be rewarding. More children will get to know their grandparents and even their great-grandparents. Healthy seniors can share their knowledge with younger generations while continuing to make valuable contributions to society. As a society, we can learn much about life’s tribulations, joys, and values by listening between the generations.

The term “anti-aging” is a misnomer. Each one of us must accept the fact that aging is a process that we all will experience and may experience even longer than ever before. Life expectancy is on the rise. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, although centenarians are still uncommon, the numbers of Americans aged 100 and over increased by 43.6% from 50,281 to 72,197 between 2000 and 2014.

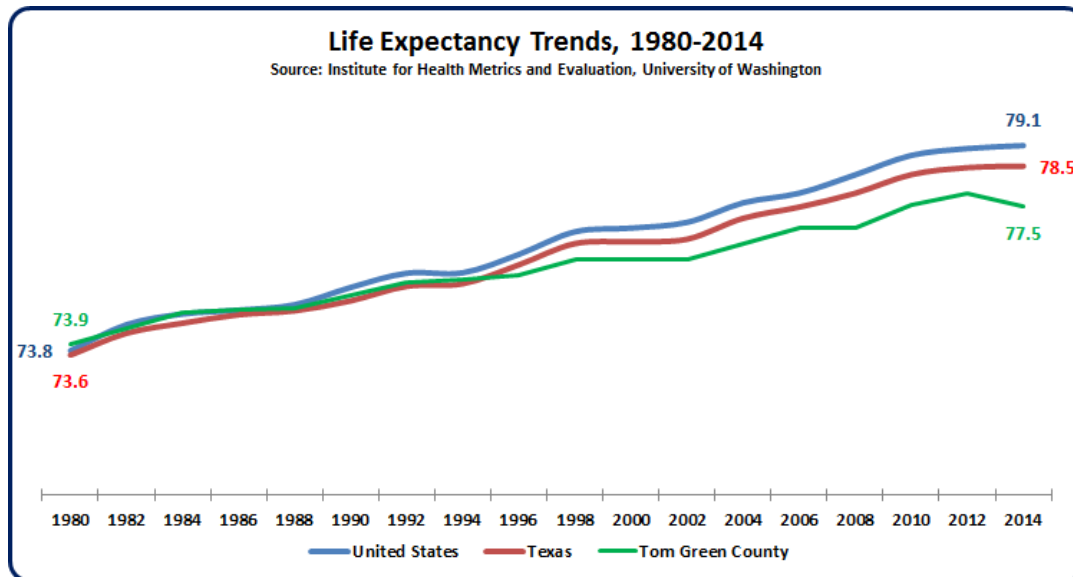
The fact that more individuals are reaching older ages means that American communities are also aging. Individuals aged 65 and over increased from 12.1% of the nation’s population in 2005 to 15.2% in 2016. Although seniors comprise a slightly smaller proportion of Texans, their growth as a population segment is more rapid, increasing from 9.6% to 12% in 2016.



Tom Green County is more advanced in the aging trend than the state’s overall population. In 2005, 13,494 county residents aged 65 and over formed 13.6% of the population.

The number of seniors swelled by a third of the 2005 number to reach 17,813 by 2016 when they made up 15% of the population. Interestingly, nearly 2,500 people aged 80 and older represented the most rapidly growing age group in Tom Green County between 2005 and 2016. Indeed, increasing life expectancy is an important contributor to aging trends nationwide.

According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, life expectancy for the U.S. population increased by 5.3 years from 73.8 in 1980 to 79.1 in 2014. Hawaii's life expectancy topped the nation in 2014 at 81.2 years, while Mississippi was lowest at 74.9. New York turned in the largest increase in life expectancy, improving by 7.2 years from 73.2 in 1980 to 80.4 in 2014.

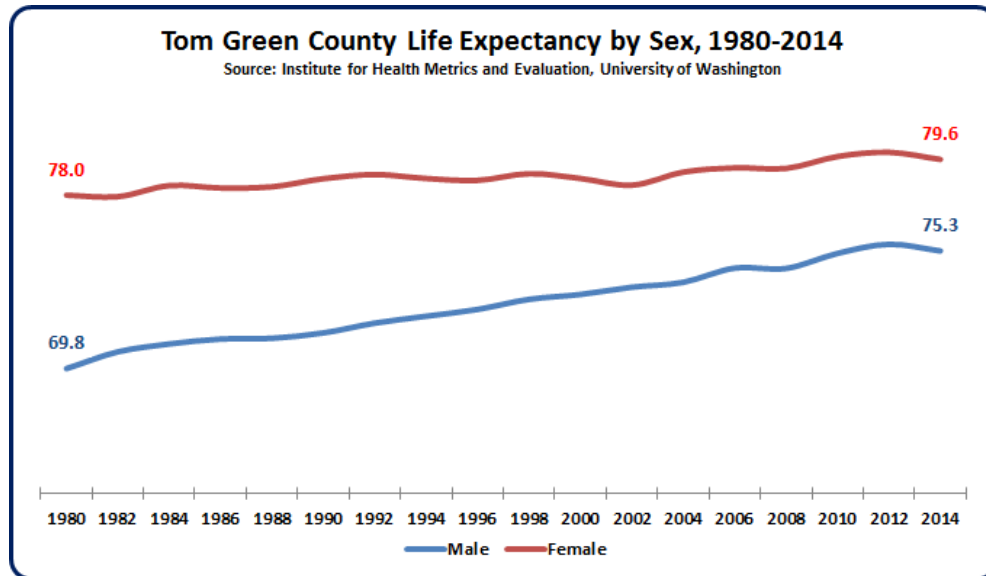


Gains in life expectancy for Texans were below average for the nation. Texans reached 78.5 years of life expectancy in 2014, an improvement of just 4.9 years over the state's 73.6 year life expectancy in 1980.

Tom Green County, on the other hand, trailed both the national and statewide trends. The county's 77.5 years of life expectancy in 2014 was only 3.6 years better than the 1980 benchmark of 73.9 years. Moreover, this unimpressive level of improvement reveals a striking gender-based health disparity in the local community.

A primary technical reason for the county's lagging status on life expectancy is that gains among half of the population were essentially nil between 1980 and 2014. Men experienced a robust addition of 5.5 years of life as their life expectancy improved from 69.8 to 75.3. During the same time, local women added only 1.7 years to life expectancy (from 77.9 to 79.6 years). The female-to-male life expectancy gap, which in most places across the nation has grown wider in favor of females for more than century, was cut in half in Tom Green County between 1980 and 2014.

Of course, these facts about life expectancy raise a conundrum. If living longer is a key generator of an aging population, then how is it possible for Tom Green County, with its faster rate of aging, to have smaller gains in life expectancy than Texas or the nation as a whole? Something else must be at work in the local community.



Mindful that San Angelo is a regional medical and economic hub with attractive lifestyle amenities and a manageable cost of living, one possibility is that the city works as a magnet attracting significant numbers of senior-aged migrants into the county. However, Census information is contrary to this speculation. Data for 2006 indicates that about 5.4% of Tom Green County residents aged 65 and over migrated from other places within the past year. This number plummeted to only 1.5% of senior residents by 2015.

Beside the 3.6 years of life expectancy gained between 1980 and 2014, change in birth patterns appear to have created the other key contributor to the aging of Tom Green County's population. Data indicate a downturn in the number of women giving birth.

Census records show that about 1,400 female residents of Tom Green County, 5.2% of those in the child bearing ages 15 to 50, gave birth during 2005. The number fell to slightly over 1,000 women comprising 3.6% of females in their child bearing years during 2014.

Terry Fulmer, an international leader in the field of geriatrics, asserts that one of the greatest stories of 20th Century America is the doubling of life expectancy. While most everyone we know values the idea of living a longer life, the truth is that seniors and the communities they live in face significant challenges as the aging of population advances.

One challenge is the need for more focus on geriatric health care. The American Geriatrics Society (AGS), a national not-for-profit society of geriatric health care professionals, predicts that approximately 30 percent of our 65-years and older residents will need a geriatrician as they age.

AGS also suggests one professional geriatrician is able to care for up to 700 older adults. Based on these AGS numbers, Tom Green County will need approximately 10 professional geriatricians to care for more than 7,000 older residents by 2026. Currently, there are five geriatric doctors in the area.

Geriatric specialists are also in short supply nationwide, and the shortage is becoming more severe. Heather Whitson, a geriatrician at Duke University's School of Medicine, believes access to geriatric care will be a major health concern for the next 50 years.

Financial security is another significant challenge for seniors and communities with an aging population. Since its inception in the 1930s, Social Security has evolved into one of the foundations for retirement security. Indeed, policy studies show that Social Security and Medicare have been keys to reducing poverty among seniors from a rate of 35.2% in 1959 to the 9.3% level for 2016.

In that recent year, 28.4% of Tom Green County's residents received Social Security benefits. Data from the Census Bureau show that Social Security is particularly important to the financial security of females living alone in the county. In 2016, only 11% of households in poverty that were occupied by single women received Social Security benefits, while 35% of similar households with incomes above the poverty line were beneficiaries.

Unfortunately, policymakers have allowed this crucial mechanism for financial security to become increasingly vulnerable to demographic trends. Recently, after passing a tax bill sure to balloon the national debt, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan said, "We're going to have to get back next year at entitlement reform, which is how you tackle the debt and the deficit."

Echoing the Speaker, Senator Marco Rubio confirmed that "reform" means cutting funds. Tax policy will not directly affect the deficit, he claimed, only increasing economic growth and limiting the costs of Social Security and Medicare can bring the national debt under control.

We believe, to the contrary, that a combination of sound retirement benefits provided by employers, supplemented by Social Security benefits, have to be set at sufficient levels to ensure financial security for older people. In the end, it is not that hard to figure out what is necessary to fix Social Security. Policymakers can raise or remove the ceiling on the Social Security tax, extend the retirement age, set up means testing for benefits, or a combination of such measures.

These are hard choices, to be sure, but finding the balance between employer-based retirement and Social Security benefits is an issue that demands solution for the young, the old, and every other member of every local community across America.

It is not too much in this great community, state, and nation to ensure that seniors have equal access to the health and the financial resources they need to live longer, healthier lives. Abraham Lincoln once noted, "In the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years." A failure to respect that wisdom insults and demeans us all.