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**Aging and disability population trends: Their impact on tourism in the future**

Tourism is affected by many outside forces including an increase in the aging population and an increase in the number of people with disabilities. By staying abreast of these forces, tourism industries will know their customers and thus be able to provide better customer service. Just as Baby Boomers had an impact on the education system and the labor market, this large cohort will also have an impact on tourism services. With the population aging and the likelihood of acquiring a disability as one ages, the growth in the number of people with disabilities will accelerate in the coming decades. With the increasing number of people with disabilities and the increasing number of older individuals, tourism services must ready themselves to meet the challenge. Providing adequate tourism opportunities and services is not only a legal responsibility but a moral obligation as well.

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Key Words: travel, tourism, aging, disability, population trends

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Tourism is affected by many outside forces. Two of the major forces are an increase in the aging population and an increase in the number of people with disabilities. By staying abreast of these forces, tourism industries will know their customers and thus be able to provide better customer service. However, are we prepared as a profession for the projected increase of older individuals with disabilities over future decades? This paper examines these issues and attempts to answer that question.

### **Aging of the population**

The older population, persons 65 years or older, numbered 34.5 million in 1999 and represented 12.7% of the U.S. population, or one in every eight Americans. The number of older Americans has increased by 3.3 million or 10.6% since 1990, compared to an increase of 9.1% for the under-65 population. Since 1900, the percentage of Americans 65+ has more than tripled (4.1% in 1900 to 12.7% in 1999). The older population itself is also getting older. In 1999 the 65-74 age group was eight times larger than in 1900, but the 75-84 group was 16 times larger, and the 85+ group was 34 times larger. Almost 2.0 million persons celebrated their 65<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1999, translating to 5,422 per day (AoA, 2001). The growth of the elderly population and the future influence of the Baby-Boom generation are sure to influence the way the tourism industry does business. When the Baby-Boom generation begins turning age 65 in 2011, we will experience a rapid growth in the number of persons 65 and over. Just as Baby Boomers had an impact on the education system and the labor market, this large cohort will also have an impact on tourism services. In 2020, the Baby Boomers will be pre- and early-retirement ages (55 to 64 years) and young old ages (65 to 74 years). Between 1990 and 2020, the population ages 65 to 74 could grow as much as 74 percent, while the population under age 65 would increase only 24 percent (Lawson & Kinsella, 1996). The elderly population increased 10-fold from 1900 to 1960, while the population under age 65 increased only 2.2 times during the same period. Between 1960 and 1990, the elderly grew by 88 percent, compared to 34 percent for persons under age 65. An elderly population explosion between 2010 and 2030 is inevitable as the Baby-Boom generation reaches age 65. And, about 1 in 5 U.S. citizens will be elderly by 2030. The oldest old, 3.5 million persons in 1994, represented just over 1 percent of the U.S. population. By 2020, the size of the population age 85 and over is projected to double to 7 million. The oldest old will again double to 14 million by 2040 as the survivors of the Baby-Boom cohort reach the oldest ages (Lawson & Kinsella, 1996). Since the older population often has chronic health problems which demand special attention, the rapid growth of this population group has many implications for the tourism industry.

### **People with disabilities**

A person has a disability if he or she has difficulty performing functions such as seeing, hearing, talking, walking, climbing stairs, lifting, or carrying. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) a person with a disability is defined as one with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. A major life activity includes caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working, and participating in community activities (LaPlante, 1991). If a person has difficulty performing activities of daily living, or has difficulty working at a job or around the house, he or she has a severe disability. About 1 in 5 Americans has some form of

disability and 1 in 10 has a severe disability (Kraus, Stoddard, & Gilmartin, 1996). With the population aging and the likelihood of acquiring a disability as one ages, the growth in the number of people with disabilities will accelerate in the coming decades. If current trends continue, Americans 65 years old and over will make up 20 percent of the total population by the year 2030 compared with about 12 percent currently. In 1995, for example, about 16 million of an estimated 31 million seniors age 65 and over reported some level of disability (McNeil, 1997). If the trend continues to 2030, half the older population will have a disability, but the numbers will be much larger. We could see as many as 34.7 million older people with disabilities, more than twice the numbers of 1995. These numbers are sure to put a strain on tourism services.

## **Implications**

Accessibility barriers in the tourism industry are a significant issue for people with disabilities (Card & Takeda, 2002; Turco, Stumbo, & Garnarcz, 1998). If individuals do not have access to facilities and services, they will not use those services. Attitudinal barriers, namely staff negative attitudes toward people with disabilities, affect the leisure satisfaction of individuals (Bedini, 2000). And, if staff attitudes in the tourism industry are negative toward this group of older people with disabilities, this group will not use those services. If services do not provide adequate accessibility and positive staff attitudes, they are missing out on a lucrative market. With the increasing number of people with disabilities and the increasing number of older individuals, tourism services must ready themselves to meet the challenge. We must also remember we are all just temporarily young and able bodied. We can join the ranks at any time (Stanat & Gray, 1995). The education and training of tourism services must keep up with the demographic trends and needs of increasingly older tourists with disabilities. We must talk to consumers about what tourism can offer to the millions of older individuals living with disabilities. Providing adequate tourism opportunities and services is not only a legal responsibility but a moral obligation as well.

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