

The Senior Citizens

J. Francis Cooper

R. L. Reeder

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/jac>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Cooper, J. Francis and Reeder, R. L. (1971) "The Senior Citizens," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 54: Iss. 4. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.2075>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Applied Communications* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

The Senior Citizens

Abstract

What older people dread most about retirement is loss of contact with other people, especially younger people, and with what's going on in the world where they have had an active role.

The Senior Citizens

J. FRANCIS COOPER and R. L. REEDER*

WHAT OLDER PEOPLE DREAD most about retirement is loss of contact with other people, especially younger people, and with what's going on in the world where they have had an active role. Most workers who retire try to get into some useful kind of work as a form of semi-retirement. They seem to go through a series of steps or stages of retirement that are psychological as well as physical, rather than a sudden drop from activity to idleness.

Retired Dean Coover of engineering at Iowa State University has been learning to play the electric organ as a hobby since his retirement. "I looked forward to retiring," he says, "and had many things planned, that I had saved up, because I wanted to keep busy. They lasted me about 2½ days."

Retired Director Volk of the Purdue Experiment Station said: "Suddenly you don't get mail. There are no letters and no telephone calls. It's pretty quiet when you leave the job."

Mrs. E. T. York, mother of the Florida vice-president for agriculture, says she belongs to a few clubs, such as XYZ for "extra years of zest," and the members are constantly seeking things to do that will help themselves and each other. She and the local extension agent have set up some work sessions to show senior citizens how to make minor repairs to things around the house.

A retired farmer, C. D. Newbern, now living in Gainesville, is working part time as ticket taker at a bank parking lot. He says a man retiring from farming needs something that continues to keep him busy, part-time work, a profitable or at least an interesting hobby. Otherwise he "goes to seed."

In rural areas there are three kinds of retirees who are interested in agriculture. There are those retiring from farming; there are those retiring from other professions who want to be either

* Retired editor, University of Florida, now farm magazine correspondent, and associate professor of agricultural information, Purdue University, respectively.

acreage-type or small farmers; and those from other professions who pay taxes and who are interested because they recognize the important place agriculture has in the life of everyone.

In fact, one retiree may go through stages that make him all of these at various times and ages. C. A. Reeder, father of one of the authors, retired from a small-town implement-hardware store, moved onto a small farm, then to an acreage. When that got to be too much, he moved into the city and went to work part time in a department store. Now in his 80's he finds yard work enough to do. We have found that many older citizens go through some or related stages, if their health permits them to do so.

Plan for Retirement

George Davis, retired dean of adult education at Purdue, now executive director of the Indiana Commission on Aging, has been reminding people for a good many years that they had better not wait until retirement to plan for it. He has found that if we are not active in the community—organizations, churches, clubs, friends—we will find it most difficult to change our pattern upon retirement. We won't know what to do, and we won't be very welcome to others.

We hate to think, to talk, to plan old age because we are a part of the "youth-oriented" culture of America. Someone has said that for our youth, the only obscenity now is to talk about old age. It is pessimistic and depressing. We don't want to start downhill by planning for something we don't want to happen. "Aging is not one of my problems," says the young college man.

Yet Davis points out to him that a man is now likely to spend as many years in retirement as he does in his professional work. General Motors and Caterpillar contracts have begun calling for retirement at age 56, and the predictions are that other institutions will follow this lead. It means that we must anticipate getting along for 20 or 25 years as retired persons. That's a long time watching television or puttering around the yard, if we've made no other preparation.

One of Florida's groups, meeting for the White House Conference on Aging in November, suggests: "We recommend that programs be designed to reach all groups, with special emphasis given to those areas of greatest need, and that training from birth onward be given to prepare everyone for eventual retirement. . ."

Among the suggestions of Dr. Davis is that young people should

plan for their retirement years while they are in college, but that the schools ought to get to people earlier by including retirement in the curriculum of secondary education because "that's the last time schools catch a lot of us." He has urged Ball State University in 1972 to hold the first high-school teacher workshop on aging, so that it can be a part of various kinds of classes.

An excellent report from the Utah White House Conference people says: "Another major problem is the one which emerges during the 'earning years' when most of man's time and ambition are directed toward earning a living. Because of the many demands throughout the working period of life, there is an apparent loss of perspective concerning the retirement period.

There is a strong orientation toward work in the American culture and with prime focus on current needs. Therefore, it is not uncommon that many Americans suddenly find themselves without money or work. In addition to assistance from our educational institutions in the early years, a strong follow-up program should be developed by business, industry, and proper governmental services to reach the employee during his earning years."

20 Million in U.S. over 65

People 65 and over now make up 15 per cent of the voting-age population of this country—20 million, 10 per cent of the total population, according to *U.S. News and World Report*. Almost 5 million are officially described as living in poverty. In 1969 it cost elderly couples in cities a minimum of \$2,902 a year to maintain what was called a low standard of living by the Work Book of the White House Conference on Aging. This was only a subsistence budget. Then to live on a moderate scale, adequate to maintain health, would have cost a couple \$4,192. A comfortable but not luxurious way of life would cost \$6,617 a year. Yet in 1969 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that some 30 per cent of the couples had incomes at or below the \$2,902 level, 48 per cent had income at or below the \$4,192 level, 70 per cent at or below \$6,617.

Number-one Priority — Health

Important as income and employment are to the senior citizen, the Number One priority would seem to be health. The Utah re-

port lists it first. It represents so many things to the elderly—independence, mobility, good feeling, the ability to help others and to be useful. Says the report: “Elderly patients want to spend time sitting and talking with their physicians. They feel better when they do this. In many instances, it is not the pill that accomplishes the relief, but the ventilating of anxieties. Often, the talk outwardly seems to revolve around the problem of arthritis, but instead, the hidden anxiety results from the fear of total disability. . . .”

Old people often annoy doctors and nurses by going from one to another with their symptoms, by wanting to take time to discuss all their problems, by considering themselves health experts, and by wasting their time and money in the futile search for the “magic potion of eternal youth.” But ill health for the old is a cost for all of society, and often it is the result of health programs and education not available or accepted at an earlier age. Each of us, as a part of this society, who helps his neighbor and is in turn helped by his neighbor, will have to contribute his own best possible health.

Dan Allegger of the Florida Experiment Station reports a study of medical care costs of white and Negro householders in selected rural areas of the South, a random sample in 17 counties of five states. He reports:

“Collectively, American society is deeply involved in the plight of rural southerners. Rural poverty entraps 14 million Americans, and substantial proportions of them live in the open countryside, villages, and towns of the South. Countless numbers of them take to the road every year, usually for the northern cities. The social problems born of malnutrition, unsanitary housing, uncorrected health impairments, and uncertainty of roles in life are thereby transferred away from a region, but this is not a corrective solution in itself.

“As now appears probable, more than half of the rural southerners of the kind analyzed will not be able to pay their own health costs upon reaching retirement. Even the payments for medicare insurance are major expenditures for some retirees, but as a result their health may be greatly enhanced. . . .”

Nutrition Needs

Among older persons, nutrition becomes an increasing cause of poor health, says *U.S. News and World Report*. Many are anx-

ious to keep food bills at a minimum, and there are other causes such as lack of mobility, emotional stress, and loneliness.

In an Iowa survey of 695 persons aged 65 years and over, only one person in 20 was choosing a nutritionally desirable diet. In America's big cities social workers have found instances of elderly poor virtually starving to death rather than accepting welfare.

Last fall in conferences throughout Florida, the over-65-year-olds reported their own needs, and among them was nutrition. They recommended that nutrition programs be developed so that all senior citizens will be assured nutritious meals. Too often, they said, the waning interest in food is a deterrent to the preparation of proper meals, with consequent health problems.

A report from the Task Force on Aging said last year: ". . . The incidence of malnutrition among the elderly can be reduced significantly . . . loneliness, isolation, physical disability, problems of dentures, and nutritional ignorance are as much to blame for poor nutrition among the elderly as is poverty. These factors affect all older persons, whatever their economic status. Important as more cash or in-kind income is, in itself it will not eliminate the malnutrition from which older persons suffer."

Need for Independence

Prime reason for wanting good health among old people we interviewed is their desire for continued independence. Their automobile is a symbol of this, too. They equate it with the ability to come and go as they please—getting to church, the doctor, the grocery, visiting friends, finding recreation. Among our friends, we notice the most deterioration when deprived of cars. Usually this happens because insurance has become too high or has been refused, or because driver's licenses cannot be renewed. Eyesight, hearing, or general physical condition may stop their driving, leaving them dependent on relatives or friends for transportation. Utah senior citizens listed this fourth among their priorities of need. For many older folk, rural or urban, their movement is limited pretty much to how far they can walk, and the older they get, the more difficult is their walking.

We asked Dr. Davis if he, in his late 70's now, still continued to grow his field of gladiolas. He said: "Yes a man needs something like that for the joy it gives him. But I now carry a stick with me to the field. Sometimes I seem to have a little trouble

getting up when I've been down a while." He is also driving 130 miles each day to put in full time at his Commission on Aging office.

When we come up behind an elderly couple on the highway and grouch around that their slow driving is a menace to traffic, we might well remember their problems. Their insurance is expensive and temporary, driver's license precious, eyesight and hearing not the best. And most of all, what will they do for transportation when they can no longer drive? They will be, as the Utah report reminds us, in "solitary confinement," a way of life all too common among older Americans living even in their own homes.

Co-author Cooper has been retired from university work for 10 years. Yet he is writing free lance for some farm magazines—*The Progressive Farmer* every month and occasionally for *American Fruit Grower*, *American Vegetable Grower*, *Florida Grower and Rancher*, and a few others. He has done a bit of work for a Washington public relations firm, gets an occasional order from a New York advertising agency to supply black and white and colored pictures, prepares a quarterly newsletter for the Florida Swine Producers Association, and is doing some work on a book for the Florida Cattlemen's Association.

If income, health, nutrition, and transportation are four of the high-priority problems of senior citizens, and only the last is not obvious, are there other more subtle things to be recognized? The parents of one of the authors, now in their late 80's, have told him often that they have simply outlived their friends. Most of the people they once called close friends have died, or are in nursing homes or hospitals. Ogden Nash covered the subject with a verse that he called "Crossing the Border." It says:

"Senescence begins
And middle age ends
The day your descendants
Outnumber your friends."

One of the men we interviewed, a retired minister of 92, was living in a fine, new retirement home. Did he like it? He hated it, he said, because there were only old people living in it. "They talk about the same things, say the same things, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner." When we talked with him, he was refusing to go down to his meals, shave or dress up. Indeed he was in solitary confinement.

Need for Something to Do

There is the great need for “something to do,” and for many of the senior citizens, this something can be recreation. Many activity centers have appeared around the country that offer arts and crafts, and other forms of recreation—a place to go, games, reading, television. We visited some of these, talked with the people who supervise them. Good and useful as they may be, we came away feeling that often the need is for more than “something to do.” It is the need for something useful to someone else.

The Utah report echoes this when it puts on the cover: “We Help Ourselves by Helping Others.” It is almost as if the elderly are saying the same thing as the young people, that they want to be doing things that are important to other people. Here may be a guide to bridging a two-generation communication gap. Old people want to be around young people, both want to be useful to society, and the trick may be to help each group have the patience to work with the other.

One of our oldsters said to us: “Seems the only time I laugh anymore is when I’m with my granddaughter. I bet she doesn’t know she’s the only one I can laugh with.” Wouldn’t it be something if the teen-agers and the senior citizens could find things to laugh about together?

Senior-Citizen Service

Hospitals and nursing homes are offering an opportunity for senior-citizen service. Older women and men are responding with various forms of grey ladies and redcoats. Most communities, especially the smaller ones that are becoming more and more retirement villages, are in great need of all kinds of services—medical aides, barbers, electricians, plumbers, mechanics. Churches could offer, and sometimes are offering, opportunities for public services that keep oldsters active

Schools at all levels are in need of good teachers in many of the skills that old people have, but they have been remarkably reluctant to make use of them. In fact, universities have been most eager to retire their people at a prescribed age. We were alarmed as we called around the country to get material for this paper at the small amount of senior-citizen programming by extension in the various states. Again it tends to be recreation-oriented, rather than to be usefulness-intended.

At this meeting we are in a state that is a haven for older peo-

ple who want to enjoy a warm climate. Florida, Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas, South Dakota, and Missouri have an unusually high proportion of older persons. Within the last 10 years, the number of people in Florida over 65 has increased 78 per cent while total population was increasing 37 per cent.

More and more we are reading that, because one in 10 of Americans is over 65, they are getting more politically militant, that they will shortly be demanding all kinds of special privileges. But our interviews have not caught this overtone of selfishness; ours is more the impression of eagerness to help others who are in a worse plight. There is an urgency about their need for feeling useful, and a failure to recognize this could lead to introversion, turning back in desperation to concern only about personal health and misfortune.

None of us wants to get old, but as senior citizens repeatedly told us, "it beats the hell out of the alternative."

Need to Communicate

One of the subtle things about old age concerns us particularly at this meeting—the increasing difficulty of communication. Older people want very much to continue to know what's going on, whether it's about relatives or music or politics. They get much from watching television, although little of it is programmed for them. One 87-year-old man said: "I believe I could make every day a little bit better if I could hear George Beverly Shea sing 'How Great Thou Art' each morning."

A column by Dr. Max Rafferty in the *Florida Times-Union* for July 4, 1971, has some refreshing statements about the older generation. He quotes Dr. Eric Walker, president of Pennsylvania State University, in a commencement address as follows:

"If you will look over into the bleachers to your left or right, I will reintroduce you to representatives of some of the most remarkable people ever to walk the earth, people you might want to thank on this graduation day.

"These, your parents and grandparents, are the people who within just five decades have by their work increased your life expectancy by 50 per cent and who, while cutting the work day by a third, have doubled the per capita output.

"These are the people who have given you a healthier world than they found. Because of this you no longer have to fear epidemics of flu, typhus, diphtheria, smallpox, scarlet fever, measles,

or mumps that they knew in their youth. The dreaded polio is no longer a factor. TB is almost unheard of.

“Let me remind you that these remarkable people have lived through history’s greatest depression. Many know what it is to be poor, what it is to be hungry and cold. And because of this, they determined that it would not happen to you, that you would have a better life, food to eat, milk to drink, vitamins to nourish you, a warm home, better schools, and greater opportunities to succeed than they had.

“Because they gave you the best, you are the tallest, healthiest, brightest, and probably the best-looking generation to inhabit the land. And because they were materialistic, you will work fewer hours, learn more, have more leisure time, travel to more distant places, and have more of a chance to follow your life’s ambitions.”

When senior-citizen eyesight permits, they love to read. When radio tries to get something useful to them, they want to listen. There seems to be no lessening of the desire to learn about new things, to insert them into the memories of things past that have been useful and exciting. The church and religion continue to hold for most of the oldsters a place of major importance—part social, part spiritual, a promise and a hope.

Talking a Little Lower

Our personal observations are that people are talking a little lower than they were—especially our bosses, who seem to think their position permits them the luxury of inarticulateness. The steps are a bit higher, the blocks a bit longer, and going slower at 70 is not a sin. Gordon Jenkins summed it up in his song: “This Is All I Ask.” Some of it goes:

“Beautiful girl, walk a little slower when you walk by me;
Lingering sunset, stay a little longer by the lonesome sea.
Children everywhere, when you shoot at badmen, shoot at
me—

Take me to that strange enchanted land
Grownups seldom understand.
Leave a bit of color for my heart to own—
Stars in the sky, make my wish come true
before the night has flown—

And let the music play as long as there’s a song to sing,
And I will stay younger than spring.”