
LONG DISTANCE RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY & THE BABY BOOM

by Charles F. Longino, Jr.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Longino, Jr., Ph.D., is Wake Forest distinguished professor of sociology and director of the Reynolda Gerontology Program at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He is also professor of public health sciences and associate director of the J. Paul Sticht Center on Aging at the Wake Forest University School of Medicine. Longino is a fellow and former officer of the Gerontological Society of America; a founding fellow of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education; and currently is (Continued on page 45)

The housing industry has loved the baby boom since its members entered the housing market in the mid-1970s. Born between 1946 and 1964, this large birth cohort has affected the housing marketplace until today. Developers of retirement housing are jockeying for position, anticipating the retirement of the baby boom between 2010 and 2028. The question most often asked by developers is “how will baby boomers be different from retirees who have gone before them?”

This manuscript will focus on only one segment of baby boom retirees, namely, those who may make long-distance residential moves. A strong attempt has been made to ground the speculation, therefore, in the body of knowledge accumulated in a research literature known as retirement migration (Longino, 1995).

Speculation about the baby boom is certainly not new. The behavior of members of the baby boom generation has been a subject of intense speculation generally for decades, because fluctuation in the size of a population brings with it resulting fluctuations in the numbers of potential students, voters, workers, drivers, home owners, service users, and consumers of all kinds. Every institutional sector of society has had to pay attention or risk disastrous consequences (Russell, 1993).

The maturing of the baby boom created a tidal wave of individuals moving through schools from kindergarten to college, into job markets, along career paths, and into first and second home markets. Now into financial markets, boomers, in their forties and early fifties, are beginning finally to invest in their future retirement lifestyles (Dent, 1993). In

about five years, as the earliest and oldest baby boomers approach very early retirement, the speculation about retirement mobility patterns in this huge birth cohort has already begun to buzz with intense conjecture.

TREATING THE BABY BOOM AS THOUGH IT IS A CONCRETE THING

It is always dangerous to assume that any marketplace is only influenced by population size. Not all voters vote, nor do all consumers consume. Projected market trends based on such oversimple assumptions are bound to disappoint in the end. For example, such projections tend to overlook the fact that baby boomers have a distinctive market profile.

Age-based marketing has created an image of baby boomers that is truly mythic in proportion. One often hears such phrases as the baby boom likes certain things or will take certain actions, as if the baby boom were a person. This tendency to reifying the baby boom is philosophical wrong-headedness. It may be too obvious to point out that the goal of marketing is to sell products and services. Marketing, therefore, is most interested in that part of the population with discretionary income. By focusing just on the college-educated portion of the population, however, demographic analysts have built psychographic images that are then applied by the lay observer to all persons born between 1946 and 1964. Such uncomplicated thinking reifies the baby boom and ignores its rich diversity.

All myths, however, are rooted in an element of truth. And the generalized images of middle-class baby boomers generated by age-based marketing cannot be dismissed out-of-hand. Overall, there is a greater value for independence, the entrepreneurial spirit, and empowerment. Also, there is a greater distrust of authority of all kinds, less company and brand loyalty, greater value for leisure over work, informality over formality, and a more relativistic understanding of ethics among middle-class baby boomers than there were among their parents (*Russell, 1993*). To the extent that retirement moves are made by the better-educated part of the middle-class, these baby boom values may have an influence on their mobility choices.

What has been described in the research literature as lifestyle-motivated migration, should apply well to baby boomers. One would expect that their appetite for leisure and new experiences would reinforce retirement migration to areas rich in amenities

with pleasant climates and vistas. Therefore, for the 20 years following 2010, there should be a surge of migration of recently retired baby boomers to high amenity areas. The tide will rise rapidly for the first decade of this period, the rate of growth slowing during the second. Retirement community developers are already rubbing their hands together in eager anticipation of this surge. The problem is that they will cross a valley before they get to the population mountain, so positioning themselves too early with large-scale construction projects could be problematic. People retiring now were born during the depression when fertility rates were at a historical low.

Unfortunately, however, when projecting images of baby boom relocation more than two decades in the future, one cannot take into account surprising technological and economic changes that will occur in the interim. These factors will certainly alter population-based projections, perhaps even radically. It is much more realistic to discuss the diversity within the early baby boomers and how this diversity will expand our understanding of retirement lifestyles, including those among the mobile.

APPROACHES TO RETIREMENT MOBILITY

Are there characteristics and attributes in the baby boom population that may bear on the issue of retirement migration? Certainly there are. First, there will be an increase in the number of couples among retirees where both had careers, and who have complex packages of retirement income drawn from several sources. There will be, perhaps, a larger increase in the retirement of single parents, whose reduced opportunities and increased burdens may leave them with reduced retirement income. So, greater relative wealth *and* poverty may be simultaneously evident in the retiring baby boom. In the upper income end of the distribution, the number of those who can afford to make retirement amenity moves will increase. The simultaneous growth of the low-income elderly will have little effect on interstate migration. The near-poor have not been well represented among amenity migrants in past decades. The unprecedented growth of the U.S. economy during the middle-aging of the baby boom will no doubt enhance the wealth of couples with two professional careers.

Second, due to the elevated value of leisure in the baby boom upper income segment, those with ample financial resources in their fifties may be lured during the next decade by the development of leisure-oriented "empty nest" communities that

are beginning to appear in Arizona, Texas, and elsewhere. These communities feature golf, health spas, hiking and biking trails, club houses, and to the casual observer, they look very much like upscale retirement communities. Most of the residents, however, are not yet retired. Nor are they interstate migrants. Rather, they move from, and commute to, the adjacent metropolitan area. Of course, if the residents do not move, the residential development, over time, will become a retirement community, de facto.

Third, it is easy to speculate that, as middle-class baby boomers first enter retirement, there will be an increase in alternative retirement lifestyles. Carrying on as before, but without working, or moving to a retirement community in the Sunbelt, will not be the only lifestyles from which to choose. Some of these choices will not require the purchase of a new home, nor a permanent move. Lifestyle change characterized many college students in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The early boomers valued their generational differences. They let their hair grow long, dressed down, and rejected the view of maturity espoused by the middle-class of the 1950s. As a consequence, some will be more sensitive to experience rather than location. The idea of a permanent retirement move may not attract these particular boomers.

Rescue operations.

For boomers with a strong service orientation and the willingness to spend parts of the year away from home, the American Red Cross already provides an interesting model. The organization trains a cadre of volunteers who will fly into disaster areas and set up the infrastructure for the thousands of local volunteers who will put out the fires, search for survivors, or fill sandbags. The lodging, feeding, and health care of these volunteers requires trained volunteers who are willing to move from one natural disaster to another. And most of these trained volunteers are retired. This kind of activity is certainly more experience-based than location-based and it is a functional alternative to retirement migration. The Peace Corps was a baby boom phenomenon; it will surely find a counterpart among retirees of the same birth cohort.

Senior volunteer services.

There are organizations that help retirees to find places where they can live and work as volunteers on projects that are not as dramatic as rescue operations. The Human Service Alliance of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, for example, houses

The generalized images of middle-class baby boomers generated by age-based marketing cannot be dismissed out-of-hand. Overall, there is a greater value for independence, the entrepreneurial spirit, and empowerment. Also, there is a greater distrust of authority of all kinds, less company and brand loyalty, greater value for leisure over work, informality over formality, and a more relativistic understanding of ethics among middle-class baby boomers than there were among their parents. To the extent that retirement moves are made by the better-educated part of the middle-class, these baby boom values may have an influence on their mobility choices.

and trains hospice workers who care for the terminally ill in a home-like environment and respite workers who care for autistic children weekly in an enriched educational environment. Retired couples are among the live-in volunteers. These are service opportunities that require travel and temporary relocation, and may be viewed as an alternative to leisure-oriented seasonal migration.

Elderhosteling.

Summer visits to college campuses across this country have been organized for decades by the Elderhostel organization. During the past decade, it has expanded its operation to college campuses in several other countries. Perhaps such travel should be considered as an alternative to vacations, rather than to residential moves, because the visits are for a relatively short duration. Indeed, elderhosteling in no way precludes a retirement move. Nonetheless, it is experience-based mobility and demand for these experiences that are likely to increase among early-retired baby boomers. Sensing an increased interest in service opportunities among early baby boomers, Elderhostel is setting up a branch office to expand the concept into this new area.

Mobility in cyberspace.

Baby boomers dominate the Internet. In proportion to their numbers, Generation Xers use it more, but boomers greatly outnumber them (*Smith &*

Clurman, 1997). An opulent banquet of mobility experiences will be marketed to retired baby boomers over this medium. The Internet home pages of the many Sun Cities, for example, are an integral part of their national marketing operation. At the same time, Elderhostel makes worldwide educational travel information available on its home page. National volunteer organizations, such as Senior Corps and the Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement do the same. Communications for a Sustainable Future cut across education and service domains, offering campus-based opportunities to study ecology and the environment, heterodox economics, peace and conflict, education and service-learning, and international studies. These topics sound like baby boom agendas of the late 1960s. During the next 10 years, Internet opportunities to learn about experience-based mobility will double and double again, encouraging further the diversity of retirement activity for baby boomers.

Virtual communities.

We are at an early stage in the development of virtual reality as a viable travel experience. The popular image of the future in this regard is the holodeck on the Starship Enterprise. There is no way at this time to make reasonable projections concerning the availability and uses of such technology in the future. However, the future will be different than the present, and by 2050 when the baby boom dies off, it may be very different indeed. There will be technologies in the future that will simulate travel in ways that will satiate wanderlust without requiring physical mobility. How these technologies will influence geographic mobility in retirement is anyone's guess, but to ignore their potential would be foolish.

CONCLUSION

So, will the patterns of retirement mobility change between 2010 and 2020 as the baby boom generation enters retirement? The answer, of course, is yes and no. The general patterns of retirement migration have changed very little over the past 40 years. Between 4 percent and 5 percent of the population 60 or older will move across state lines in each five-year period. Most will be recent retirees. The popular destination states today will be popular among migrants in 20 years. Actually, even if somewhat smaller proportions pour into Florida, Arizona, Texas, North Carolina, and California, the larger population base will still make the numbers rise.

On the other hand, there are enough free agents and trailblazers among baby boomers that some new

trends should be set into motion. Some candidates have been suggested here.^{REI}

REFERENCES

- Dent, H. S., Jr. (1993). *The Great Boom Ahead*. New York: Hyperion
Longino, C.F., Jr. (1995). *Retirement migration in America*. Houston: Vacation Publications.
Russell, C. (1993). *The master trend: How the baby boom generation is remaking America*. New York: Plenum.
Smith, J.W. & Clurman, A. (1997). *Rocking the Ages*. New York: HarperCollins.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

(continued from page 42)

president of the Southern Gerontological Society. He also serves on the editorial boards of six industry publications and has authored or co-authored countless journal articles, books, monographs, or compendia. Lecturing worldwide, Longino is the leading national authority on retirement migration in America. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]