



Syracuse University

Aging Studies Institute

Aging Matters

Syracuse University's Aging Studies Institute is a leader in producing aging-related research, education, and outreach.

by Renee Gearhart Levy

Janet Wilmoth

Professor of Sociology and Director, Aging Studies Institute

In November 2016, the United States reached a milestone. For the first time, the population of Americans aged 65 or older hit 50 million. Post-World War II baby boomers are projected to live longer than any previous generation. Between now and 2050, experts project the population 85 and older will grow from five million to 18 million.



This transformational demographic shift is happening worldwide. According to the United Nations, the aged population is at its highest in human history, the result of declining birth rates and longer life expectancy in much of the world.

The health and economic status of that aging population is having major social, cultural, and economic consequences on everything

from intergenerational family dynamics, to the housing market and labor force, to the viability of programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

“The social, economic, political, and human challenges posed by aging have enormous consequences, not just for the elderly, but for the families that care for them and society as a whole.”

The implications of those changes are what fuel Syracuse University's Aging Studies Institute (ASI), a joint initiative of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and the David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics. The ASI is a dynamic network of more than 40 faculty experts representing 15 academic departments, whose collaboration and scholarship contribute significant theoretical and empirical knowledge to

the field of aging.

Created in 2011, the ASI grew out of the well-known Syracuse Gerontology Center, one of the oldest university-based gerontology programs. Operating out of its home in Lyman Hall, ASI coordinates and promotes interdisciplinary aging-related research, education, and outreach at Syracuse University and in the surrounding community. ASI is also home to the Center for Aging and Policy Studies (CAPS), which promotes policy-relevant scholarship and has partnered with the Cornell Population Center to create the Upstate Population Research Consortium, which encourages research and training in demography.

“We use the term ‘aging’ broadly at the ASI,” says director Janet Wilmoth, a sociologist and demographer. “We’re not solely concerned with older adults but aging across the life span.”

That said, “Everyone associated with the ASI is motivated by a concern about the growing proportion of the population that is older,” says Wilmoth. “That changing demographic inspires our research.”

The ASI facilitates that through robust programming, such as lectures, seminars, and thematic conferences that expose those interested in issues related to aging to the vast array of scholarship taking place in a multitude of disciplines, often spawning new collaboration.

Wilmoth, for example, is involved in a longitudinal study with fellow sociologist Andrew London of how military service affects veterans’ lives over time. She also collaborates with neuroscientist Donna Korol and graduate student Mary Pagan on a project that studies the impact of exercise on vulnerable older populations in Syracuse, and with designer Don Carr to develop technologies to improve the lives of older adults.

The national expertise at the ASI is reflected in the external funding supporting the research of its community of experts, from sources including the Centers for Disease Control, MacArthur Foundation, National Institutes of Health, Social Security Administration, Templeton Foundation, the Health Foundation of Western and Central New York, and others.

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The goal is to advance knowledge that can inform policy relating to changing world demographics and to help develop the next generation of scholars and practitioners in the field. The ASI supports the Falk College’s undergraduate minor in gerontology, which exposes students to a variety of theoretical perspectives, research methodologies, and policy initiatives, and also coordinates a range of age-related graduate-level course work offered by various SU departments. In addition, the ASI periodically hosts a gerontology education workshop for undergraduate- and graduate-level instructors interested in teaching aging-related courses.

“The social, economic, political, and human challenges posed by aging have enormous consequences, not just for the elderly, but for the families that care for them and society as a whole,” says Wilmoth. “The Aging Studies Institute aims to be at the forefront of scholarship on these critical issues by bringing together scholars and practitioners with various perspectives from a broad range of disciplines.”

Many Viewpoints on Aging

The Aging Studies Institute brings together faculty from a multitude of departments and schools across Syracuse University with divergent perspectives on aging. Here are a few:

Jennifer Karas Montez

Assistant Professor of Sociology



Although overall U.S. life expectancy continues to increase, life expectancy of low-educated white women has recently declined. According to sociologist and demographer Jennifer Karas Montez, women

most at risk are those who live in rural areas and Southern U.S. states.

Her article, “Explaining the Widening Education Gap in Mortality Among U.S. White Women,” published in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, found that low-educated women had 66 percent higher odds of early death than their high-educated peers. “Education lowers mortality because education often provides better jobs and better incomes that can be used to purchase better health. It gives us access to larger social networks, friends who also live healthy lifestyles, and influence our lives,” says Montez, the Gerald B. Cramer Faculty Scholar in Aging Studies, and a thought leader on women’s health, aging, and mortality.

But that’s not the whole story. While research on life expectancy has traditionally focused on health behaviors, Montez is focusing on how the policies of U.S. states impact life expectancy.

She is currently collaborating with Doug Wolf

on a project examining state policies such as Medicaid and Earned Income Tax Credits.

“Lifestyle behaviors are not causes, they are symptoms of the environment and the social and economic deprivation that many parts of the country endure thanks to decades of policy decisions.”

“In the 1950s and 1960s there weren’t a lot of differences between states in their social, economic, and health policies, but by the 1970s and 80s, states began taking very different approaches. Take cigarettes taxes, for example,” explains Montez, an actively engaged expert who has testified at the National Academy of Science and served as an advisor to the Census Bureau. “New York is very aggressive, trying to discourage smoking with a high cigarette tax, while states in the south have a negligible sales tax. You can draw parallels between the decisions states have made on various issues to the mortality rate in the state.”

The bottom line: “Our life expectancy is increasingly being shaped by where we live in the U.S.,” she says. “Lifestyle behaviors are not causes, they are symptoms of the environment and the social and economic deprivation that many parts of the country endure thanks to decades of policy decisions.”

Donna Korol

Associate Professor of Biology



As a neuroscientist, Donna Korol has spent her career studying how experiences change the brain and how those changes prepare the brain for future learning across the lifespan, particularly from

adulthood through late age. Much of that research involves studies of animal models.

But since joining the Syracuse University faculty in 2012, Korol has found new avenues for her research through the Aging Studies Institute, which she says has provided a community of similar-minded researchers.

Movement for Healthy Aging, a project designed with co-investigator Janet Wilmoth, a sociologist and demographer, and Ph.D. student Mary Pagan, is testing the health benefits of dance as exercise in aging populations. A year-



Advisory Board Members pose with Mary Pagan, graduate researcher, helping organize and coordinate the Movement for Health Aging project.

long pilot program compared dance to memoir writing, a condition with similar social and psychological elements without the exercise, in demographically different groups of older adults from the greater Syracuse area. “We’re testing how this moderate exercise impacts cognitive, emotional, psychological, and physical health,” Korol says. The project continues to add new groups from various areas in the City of Syracuse, with plans for future funding to bring a no-cost dance program to communities that otherwise would not have access.

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A second ASI-related project, funded by the CAPS program, evaluates learning and memory in rat models, debunking the theory that memory loss comes with age. “Most tests were normed in young adults to show impairments with age, largely ignoring other measures of learning and memory,” Korol explains. “In our work, we reframe the problem from young as normal to old as normal, depending on the task at hand. We find that old rats actually outperform young rats on some tasks, suggesting that some functions improve with age.”

The findings suggest there are shifts in cognition with age, says Korol, wherein learning in some contexts improves, while learning in others declines.

Mary Helen McNeal

Professor of Law



An older woman came to the Syracuse University Elder Law Clinic for a will and a power of attorney. The request became more complicated when the client admitted having mild dementia and wanted to appoint a

former caregiver as the executor and agent.

“We had some questions about the wisdom of that but also about the potential for manipulation or abuse,” says Mary Helen McNeal, director of the Elder Law Clinic at Syracuse University’s College of Law.

As an active member of the ASI, McNeal was particularly attuned to dementia and patterns of exploitation of the elderly, knowledge that helped her advise her law students on how to help their client in evaluating her choices while protecting her autonomy.

McNeal founded the Elder Law Clinic in 2008, spurred by changing demographics. “Elder law was emerging as one of the fastest-growing areas of law practice and I saw the ability to offer a community service while providing a valuable educational opportunity to our students,” she says.

The clinic, which represents moderate and low-income people, provides legal services on a wide range of issues, including wills, insurance and social security claims, Medicare and Medicaid issues, advance directives, and financial abuse.

Elder law is unique, says McNeal because “It’s one of the few areas of law

where you’re representing the whole person and not just a specific legal problem.”

“I’ve learned from ASI colleagues about many aspects of the aging process, which results in a broader perspective on the legal work we do, which in turn benefits our students and our clients.”

Participation with the ASI has led to new collaborations outside the College of Law. For example, McNeal worked with Karen Doherty, professor of communication sciences and disorders and an expert on hearing aids, while researching for an article on Medicare coverage of hearing aids, published in the *Harvard Journal on Legislation*.

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Professor McNeal with her graduate students.

Merril Silverstein

Marjorie Cantor Professor of Aging Studies



Traditionally, religion is passed down in families from one generation to the next. But with Americans becoming increasingly secular, children may no longer observe to the same degree that their parents did.

“Although studies show that religious differences between parents and children have a negative impact on their relationships, little is known about how intergenerational solidarity changes with the aging of both partners,” says sociologist Merrill Silverstein, the Marjorie Cantor Professor of Aging Studies.

With funding from the Templeton Foundation, Silverstein is investigating intergenerational family life and religion, looking at issues such as how religion is passed from one generation to the next and whether people become more or less religious post-retirement. The research, which has tracked multigenerational families in southern California for four decades, is part of the Longitudinal Study of Generations, of which Silverstein is principal investigator.

Silverstein has published more than 150 age-related publications and received more than \$4.5 million in external grants for his age-related research, and served as editor of the

Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences, the discipline’s flagship journal produced by the Gerontological Society of America.

“China has achieved a rate of aging in 30 years that took 100 years in the U.S.”

For more than two decades he has studied older adults in rural China. His current research focuses on the elderly, often caring for their grandchildren, left behind by adult children who have moved from their villages for better employment in cities.

“China has achieved a rate of aging in 30 years that took 100 years in the U.S.,” Silverstein says. “The rapidly aging society, along with a growing middle class—and changing values, has the government worried about declining filial piety and how the state may have to intervene in the provision of care for older people. It’s an interesting laboratory to see the impact of social and economic change.”



ASI faculty and students pose following a presentation by Visiting Professor Anja Steinbach, University Duisburg-Essen, Germany.

Thematic Research Areas -

The research interests of faculty affiliates define the ASI's five thematic areas of focus:

AGE-BASED PUBLIC POLICY AND WELL-BEING addresses issues related to federal, state, and local policy. Gary Engelhardt, professor of economics, is a national expert in the economics of aging whose research focuses on the impact of Social Security on economic well-being in retirement; the impact of health and cognition on housing decisions in old age; and the role of financial literacy in saving behavior. A widely sought expert, he has testified before Congress and been featured in various media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post, CNBC, MSNBC, and NPR. Alejandro Garcia, professor and former chair of social work, is widely recognized for scholarship related to social policy and elderly Latinos. He is co-editor of three books, including *Elderly Latinos: Issues and Solutions for the 21st Century* (with Marta Sotomayor). He is past chair of the National Policy Council of AARP and the board of directors of the National Hispanic Council on Aging. His numerous honors include the Life Achievement Award from the Association of Latina and Latino Social Work Educators.

POPULATION AGING considers the causes and consequences of a changing population age structure in the United States and worldwide. Douglas Wolf, the Gerald B. Cramer Professor of Aging Studies, is a demographer and policy analyst who studies the economic, demographic, and social aspects of aging, disability, and long-term care aging. He is on the steering committee of the National Health and Aging Trends Study, a large-scale survey used by researchers around the world to study aging. He also directs the Center for Aging and Policy Studies. Scott Landes, assistant professor of sociology, studies morbidity and mortality trends among adults with disability, and how intellectual disability impacts life course perspectives. A recent study with co-author Andrew London, professor of sociology and associate dean in the Maxwell School, explores the link between attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and adult mortality, groundbreaking work because few studies address adults with ADHD.

FAMILY DYNAMICS, CARE WORK, AND INTERGENERATIONAL SUPPORT examines the nature of older adults' family relationships and the flow of support across generations, including caregiving and living arrangements. Madonna Harrington Meyer, professor of sociology, is the author of *Grandmothers at Work: Juggling Families and Jobs* (2014) and *Market Friendly or Family Friendly: The State and Gender Inequality in Old Age* (2007), both of which were awarded the Richard Kalish Book Award by the Gerontological Society of America. Social work professor Deborah Monahan studies aging and caregivers, including long-term care services for elderly, the convergence of disability and aging, and the health and burden of family caregivers in different populations. She is co-author of the book *Education and Support Programs for Caregivers: Research, Practice and Policy* and publishes widely in journals.

HEALTH AND FUNCTIONING addresses topics related to health across the life course, including cognitive functioning, hearing loss, and disability. Assistant research professor Maria Brown is a social gerontologist who studies later-life experiences of underserved and underrepresented groups. She and Luvenia Cowart, associate professor of health and wellness, recently completed the first year of a five-year grant from the New York State Department of Health to provide dementia education and caregiver support in the Syracuse African American community. Kevin Heffernan, associate professor of exercise science and director of the Human Performance Laboratory, studies the interaction of diet, nutritional supplementation, and exercise on vascular function, disease, and disability throughout the human lifespan.

AGING DESIGN, ENGINEERING, AND TECHNOLOGY focuses on design issues related to aging, including inclusive design and medical devices, and is an emerging area of leadership for the ASI. Don Carr, a professor of industrial and interactive design in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, coordinates a master's program that works with the ASI to train M.F.A. students in developing innovative design solutions to address the needs of elders. Sarah Redmore, assistant professor of environmental and interior design, has taken students to a six-week workshop on design for the aging population at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She is also the recipient of an Aging Beautifully Fellowship to promote universal design among interior design educators.

The Aging Studies Institute coordinates and promotes multidisciplinary aging-related research, education, and outreach at Syracuse University. Our dynamic network of over 40 faculty affiliates from more than 15 departments conducts research on a range of aging and life course topics. ASI affiliates teach undergraduate classes in the gerontology minor program, mentor graduate students through coursework and assistantships, and provide professional development via our seminars, conferences, and summer workshops. Faculty and students are also engaged in a variety of outreach activities, such as disseminating research findings and working with nonprofit organizations.



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