

2025
CENTURY
SUMMIT



Century Summit V

Century Summit V, convened by the Stanford Center on Longevity and the Longevity Project in January 2025, brought together dozens of experts with approximately 2,000 in-person and online audience members to discuss the challenges of ageism in the U.S. and the opportunities of an intergenerational future. It was a crash course in all the different ways we experience and are affected by ageism, from youth onward, with many examples of how people are challenging the status quo.

The challenges are urgent because the U.S. has been described as the most age-segregated society ever, and ageism in the U.S. imposes a considerable burden on individuals and communities alike. Ageism shortens people's lives, undermines business effectiveness, and costs our health system an estimated \$63 billion a year. And while ageism principally impacts older people, it also has impact on the prospects and hopes of younger generations. For women in particular, it permeates their lives from beginning to end.

Despite the critical nature of the issue, ageism is frequently ignored and often socially sanctioned in the workplace, in media, and in the broader culture. Panelists reported that there is no national clearinghouse to drive the issue, no national campaign to heighten people's awareness, and an insufficient vision of what a less age-segregated society of the future might look like.



Summit attendees at Stanford University in January 2025

Ageism affects all ages

While we associate ageism with the challenges of older age, the experts gathered at the Summit agreed that the negative effects of ageism and age segregation can be felt by people of all ages. That fact was reinforced by a pre-conference poll of attendees that revealed that almost 40% of respondents had experienced ageism before they turned 50.

Panelist Kate Rarey described how she was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* that at age 24 she “worries about retirement, about owning a home, about assets, about kind of what’s coming down the line.” The article drew cruel comments, calling her entitled and spoiled. “I think there’s this sense with Gen Z that we are not willing to do the hard things that come with young age,” she said. “I have to push back on that.”

And, as climate activist Pooja Tilwawala observed, generational labels can be very limiting. People tend to think of young activists as protesting or marching, but not as decision-makers, fundraisers, or program designers. Such stereotypes limit everyone. That said, she added, there are more intergenerational decision-making bodies in the climate space. “That allows the opportunity for people across generations to actually speak with each other. And even if they come in with biases, they might leave having worked with people of other generations, and have changed opinions about what somebody from that generation might be capable of. And that goes in both directions.”

“It’s here, it’s now, aging is happening. It’s something to be celebrated. It’s an accomplishment, and I think we all need to care about it. Every sector out there really needs to be leaning in, figuring out how the work going on across our economy intersects with this really special moment in time. And it is time to fix the harms and the limitations that ageism bring us.”



- Leanne Clark Shirley, President and CEO, American Society on Aging

Women face ageism across the life course

Gender also intersects with negative age consequences, in the workplace, in media and culture and in financial security. The ways in which women experience deeper impacts from age discrimination were referenced throughout the panels, but the gender contrast was most acutely observed in discussing financial security for older people. Women live longer than men (78% of the centenarians in the U.S. are women), but fewer than half have access to a retirement plan, and many of them are worried about running out of money in old age. And their fears aren't unfounded: 50% of women over 80 are living at or below the poverty line, said Cindy Hounsell, president of [WISER, the Women's Institute for Secure Retirement](#).

JoAnne Moore, a vice president at Corebridge Financial, described results of a survey her company conducted called *Women Speak Out on Money Matters*. They found that 32% of women worried about running out of money in retirement, but one in three don't know where to begin to get advice, or find it too stressful to deal with. Only 35% say they are confident in their ability to plan for retirement, compared to 49% for men. Among those who are already retired, 63% say they would start earlier to save for retirement if they could go back and do it again. Women said they wished for more knowledge about lifetime income products, investment strategies, and the stock market, as well as Social Security and Medicare.

A major investment hurdle for women is fear. Studies show that even when they have financial knowledge, they lack confidence in that knowledge, said Stanford business professor Annamaria Lusardi. "Unfortunately, this then pushes women not to act." Panelists also described the age-related challenges that women face in the workplace, describing a "no right age" challenge in which women are either dismissed as too young, too burdened with caregiving and family responsibilities or too old.

Change must begin with culture

Culture is heavily influenced by media, and various speakers described how the media climate is changing, from the representation of powerful women (Kamala Harris, Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama, Nancy Pelosi) to the brave and ferocious movies being made by some of Hollywood's top stars (Pamela Anderson, Nicole Kidman, Demi Moore). Moreover, Gen Z's intolerance toward body shaming and fat shaming is bubbling up to older women, who don't feel they have to hide their age, said Lucy Kalin, Hearst editorial director.

"We're in a moment right now where there are a lot of shows and films that are more relevant to an older audience by virtue of the fact that the protagonist is older. But it also is always met within the industry as sort of a shock and surprise that it succeeds."



- Amy Baer, President, Gidden Media

Nonetheless, older people are often underrepresented or mischaracterized by negative stereotypes. Even though people over 50 account for 34% of the population, they constitute less than a quarter of characters across broadcast, streaming, and film. And they are often depicted as "frail, frumpy, feeble, and mostly forgotten," said Madeline Di Nonno, president and CEO of the [Geena Davis Institute](#). But, she pointed out, such stereotypes are costing the industry money.

One media failing is depicting unicorns as the new norm, like presenting Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt as ideal men in their sixties, said Richard Dormant, Editorial Director, Men's Health and Women's Health, Hearst Magazines. "That's not what most of us are going to look like," he said. "I think we have to manage people's expectations about what actually aging entails and when we should embrace it."

In Hollywood, Amy Baer, president of [Gidden Media](#), has carved out a niche for herself developing roles for older people. She said the cultural landscape is progressing incrementally, but not swiftly. "We're in a moment right now where there are a lot of shows and films that are more relevant to an older audience by virtue of the fact that the protagonist is older. But it also is always met within the industry as sort of a shock and surprise that it succeeds." The creators are aware of the large audience, but unconvinced that they can monetize it.

Combating ageism also means acknowledging the diversity of aging

One thing a number of speakers emphasized was that the effort to be more age-inclusive shouldn't mean ignoring the ways in which aging is a biological reality with real consequences on people's lives.

Gerontologist Louise Aronson said that older adults are disproportionately harmed by health care, lacking the access and services that other people receive. And old age is the neglected stepchild in medical education, she said. In four years of training, the curriculum devotes three months to children's medical issues and only two weeks to those of older adults.

Aronson also said she was torn by the many positive messages about aging that emerged in many of the Summit panels because she fears that the needs of the oldest adults are getting neglected. "I think there has been a certain amount of 'othering' of the over-75 category of people, and a certain amount of utopianism about what life will be like," she said. "Elderhood is a decades-long phase of life with huge amounts of diversity, no different than childhood or adulthood.

"How can we paint this larger picture of the positives about the longevity economy without further disrespecting and 'othering' the people at the later stages? Lifestyle medicine or cosmetic medicine is huge, but geriatrics is tiny. We're reforming the 45-through-70 category at the expense of 70-plus. We're doing to the 70-plus what those of us in that earlier category don't want done to us. I'd like us to aim higher."

Businesses will need to pay closer attention to changing demographics

In addition to all the social and human-centered reasons to address ageism and age segregation, there's also a powerful business case to be made, panelists said. Businesses are missing out on important revenue streams and there are human capital losses, which is consequential at a time of skilled labor shortage.

"I deeply believe aging well should be a right and not a privilege. When we peel back the layer of why we're not there yet, it's driven by our own attitudes on aging that then manifest in the policies and the programs and the products and services we're all in, embodying those negative stereotypes on aging that we've been fed."



- Ramsey Alwin, President and CEO, The National Council on Aging

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- Louise Aronson, Geriatrician and Professor, UC San Francisco

The AARP estimates that the longevity economy represents \$7 to \$9 trillion worth of market opportunity – and that's a wake-up call, said Ramsey Alwin, President and CEO of the National Council on Aging. But the marketing world has a blind spot about the silver economy. Where we're starting to see age-inclusivity and multi-generational approaches to media and film, the advertising world is still heavily focused on youth.

The big challenge is to persuade them that they are missing an enormous opportunity. "Even though older people are over 50% of the consumer spend, that segment is only five to ten percent of the marketing spend," said Susan Giannino, senior advisor to Publicis Group. What will persuade them to change their approach is not cultural sensitivity, but relevance. They need data that demonstrate that older consumers can solve some of their challenges around growth. And business schools also need to revamp their training, to shift away from the idea that younger is better and that technology is better, and that older people don't use technology.

Enhancing intergenerational relationships is key to progress

Marc Freedman, founder and co-CEO of CoGenerate, observed that age segregation is one of the main drivers of ageism, and should be addressed head on. We need to challenge all the structural barriers that keep us apart, he said, which means creating spaces where the people of all ages meet naturally and do things together.

Freedman noted that cultural norms have changed, and can change again. He cited a book by Howard P. Chudacoff called “How Old Are You?” which documents the emergence of heightened age consciousness during the 20th century. Prior to that, little attention was paid to age, he said, and people of all age groups mingled naturally. “The last century has really been an aberration.”

What’s next?

Panelists were virtually unanimous in both extolling the progress that has been made and also acknowledging the distance that still needs to be traveled to reduce ageism in the U.S. Some ideas included:

Create a unified infrastructure. Although there are a multitude of disparate endeavors to change society’s views on aging, participants expressed concern that the various elements aren’t knitted together. To make faster progress, groups will need to come together to find common cause. Other countries (England, Australia) have large-scale public relations campaigns. Globally, the United Nations has declared 2021-2030 the Decade of Healthy Aging, and the World Health Organization has launched a ten-year anti-ageism public health initiative, declaring that ageism imposes powerful barriers for all people and has profound negative consequences on older adults’ health and well-being. There is yet to be a parallel U.S. initiative.

Invest in intergenerational collaborations. Examples of such collaborations were plentiful at the Summit, such as the [Wallis Annenberg Gen Space](#) and the [Youth Climate Initiative](#), both of which bring together generations in very different ways. But broader support of such initiatives is desperately needed, panelists said.

Foster programs in the workplace to bring the generations together. Workplaces are one of the main places where many generations come together, which can create both conflict and opportunity. People of different ages may use technology or AI in very different ways, and may have different expectations about communication. But navigating those differences builds strength and creativity. Organizations can foster mentorship programs and encourage learning across the generations.

Support a new vision of intergenerational respect. When opportunities to mingle across generations are created, Freedman said, wonderful possibilities emerge. He told a story about a friend who moved into a Cleveland retirement community that had some extra units, which were offered to students from a nearby music conservatory. Friendships blossomed, and one young couple decided to get married. They asked their neighbor, 93-year-old Carla, to be maid of honor. “What started in efficiency ended in humanity,” he said. The 20th century created a culture that divided the generations. A new culture in the 21st century can bring them back together.

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