

# AGING TRENDS

U.S. Department of Commerce  
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS  
Center for International Research

## BARBADOS

The aging of Barbadian population is unusual in several respects. The median population age, as discussed below, is rising rapidly relative to other nations, including those of Europe and North America. Among developing countries, Barbados now has one of the highest proportions of older persons, with 17 percent of the population aged 55 and over and nearly 11 percent having reached or surpassed age 65. Both figures are considerably above the Caribbean average (table 1), and are due in part to a steep decline in fertility since 1970, which has lowered the proportion of population in younger age groups. At the same time, however, the number of persons aged 55 and over is declining slightly, and will remain essentially unchanged in the early 1990's (figure 1). This reflects, to some extent, the aging of cohorts that have been decimated by past emigration.

In this sense, it is instructive to consider a society's median age, the age that divides a population into numerically equal parts of younger and older persons. For example, Barbados' current median age of 27 years indicates that the number of persons under age 27 equals the number who have already celebrated their 27th birthday.

During the next three decades, the median age will increase substantially, to 31.5 years in the year 2000, and to more than 37 years by 2020. Few countries outside the Caribbean are expected to post as rapid a gain. Such "maturing" of a society as a whole has important implications for economic productivity, health provision and delivery systems, family and household structure—in short, for socioeconomic development.

After the mid-1990's, the number of older Barbadians will begin to increase, and will climb dramatically in the second decade of the 21st century as the high-fertility cohorts of the 1950's and 1960's reach older age. Between 2005 and 2025, the number of persons aged 55 and over is projected to double, from 49,000 to 98,000.

In the immediate future, growth among older Barbadians will be concentrated in the oldest old segment (75 and over), which will register yearly increases until the turn of the century.

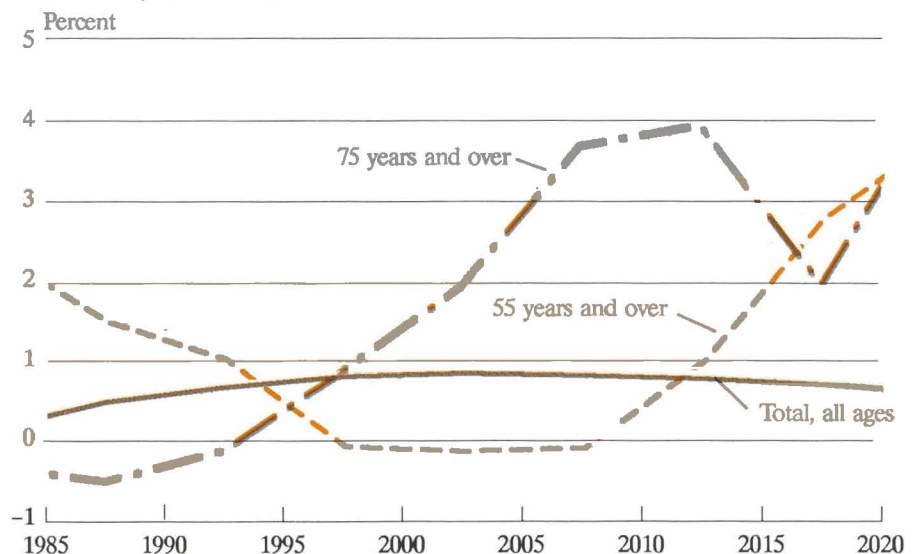
The Barbadian future looks much like that of the United States; both societies eventually face a rapid increase in older population as a result of prior baby booms. But per capita GNP in Barbados

Table 1.  
Percent of Population in Older Age Groups: 1989 to 2020

Region or country	Year	55 and over	65 and over	75 and over
All Caribbean	1989	11.8	6.1	2.3
	2005	13.7	6.8	2.6
	2020	18.7	9.0	3.3
Barbados	1989	16.8	10.6	4.7
	2005	16.9	9.1	4.3
	2020	26.0	12.8	4.6
Dominican Republic	1989	7.0	3.0	0.8
	2005	9.3	3.9	1.1
	2020	14.1	6.0	1.7
Trinidad & Tobago	1989	10.1	5.1	1.7
	2005	11.1	5.0	1.7
	2020	15.8	7.1	2.2

It is often useful to think of population aging as a process affecting the entire age spectrum, rather than as a phenomenon restricted to growth in older age groups.

Figure 1.  
Average Annual Percent Growth of Total and Older Population



is only about one-fourth of the level in the United States. The demographic trends in Barbados suggest that while there ought to be time to prepare—economically and socially—for the future surge in elderly population, current attention should be devoted to the growing needs of the oldest old.

Table 2.  
**Leading Causes of Death Among Persons Aged 65 and Over: 1984**

Cause of death	Percent of total deaths	
	Male	Female
Diseases of the heart	26.2	29.1
Cerebrovascular disease	20.2	20.2
Malignant neoplasms	19.0	16.4
Diabetes mellitus	5.7	9.1
Influenza and pneumonia	2.9	3.0

Source: Pan American Health Organization, 1986, Annex III-6.

## LIFE EXPECTANCY and MORTALITY

Life expectancy at birth in Barbados (figure 2) is high by both Caribbean and international standards. Current life expectancy for males actually exceeds that of the United States by about 1 year, while the average for both sexes is 20 percent higher than in the Dominican Republic. Female Barbadians who reach age 65 can look forward to some 25 additional years of life on average, while men at that age may expect to live 17 more years.

Data from the Pan American Health Organization show that hypertension affects 27 percent of the adult island population. Other data from the 1982 survey of the elderly in Barbados indicate that among persons aged 65 and over, this figure rises to 41 percent. Even more prevalent are various forms of arthritis, which afflict nearly half of the survey respondents. As with most of Latin America and the Caribbean, the nature of disease in Barbados has shifted over recent decades from communicable to chronic. Heart disease is the foremost cause of death among the elderly (table 2). In the Caribbean as a whole, more deaths are attributed to cancers than to cerebrovascular diseases, but this ranking is reversed in Barbados.

## GENDER and MARITAL STATUS

Older women outnumber older men in most countries of the world, and Barbados is no exception; women constitute 59 percent of the population aged 55 and

over. Because of higher life expectancies at birth and lower age-specific death rates, the percentage of women increases with age (figure 3). At the time of the 1980 census, almost 3 of every 4 octogenarians were women.

As male life expectancy improves, more men will reach their eighties, and the projected gender discrepancy at the oldest ages will lessen. Future gender imbalances should also be alleviated somewhat by virtue of the fact that more women than men emigrate from Barbados. Because women live longer on average than do men, and because women tend to marry men older than themselves, rates of widowhood are much higher for women than they are for men at older ages, and have risen slightly in the past (table 3). Nearly two-thirds of older (55+) Barbadian men are married, versus only 39 percent of older women. As

is true in much of the Caribbean, proportions of never-married individuals are high by international standards, such that 17 and 30 percent of elderly (65+) men and women, respectively, reported themselves as single in the latest census.

Table 3.  
**Percent Widowed, by Age: 1970 and 1980**

Age	Female		Male	
	1970	1980	1970	1980
55 to 59	11.4	11.0	3.7	3.3
60 to 64	16.3	17.1	6.9	5.7
65 and over	31.4	33.0	14.7	16.5

## LABOR FORCE

Data on economic activity from the 1980 census show that roughly 85 percent of persons aged 20 to 44 are in the labor force. For 5-year age groups beginning

Figure 2.  
**Life Expectancy at Birth: 1989**  
(In years)

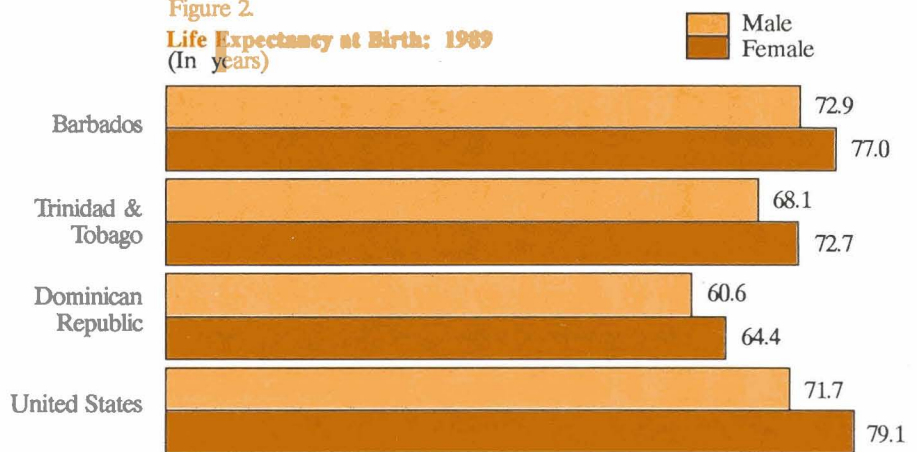
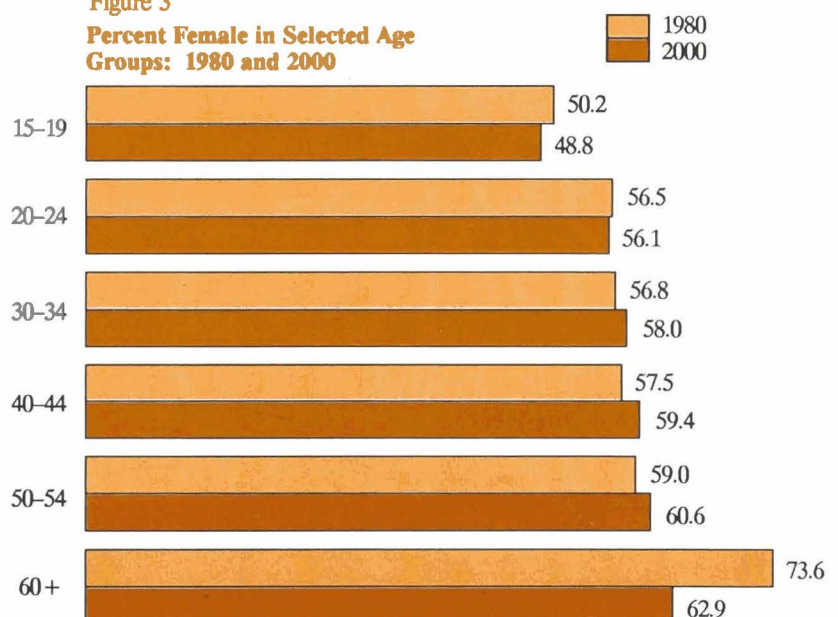


Figure 3.  
**Percent Female in Selected Age Groups: 1980 and 2000**



with age 30, the percent economically active declines, and among persons 60 to 64, fewer than half are still in the labor force; for ages 65 and over, the aggregate figure is 14 percent. As seen in figure 4, male rates at older ages are considerably higher than female rates.

The 1982 survey of the elderly in Barbados found a similar figure among persons aged 65 and over, with 15 percent reporting themselves to be in the labor market

However, as noted in the next section, 34 percent of this group also reported earnings as a source of income. This discrepancy is attributed to the fact that approximately 20 percent of persons who classify themselves as formally retired engage periodically in informal market activities (e.g., selling produce, fish, prepared foods, etc.).

As is true of most developing economies, the proportion of workers in agri-

culture rises with age (table 4). However, Barbados is unlike the majority of developing countries because more older workers are engaged in production than in agriculture. Although the proportion in production declines with age, manufacturing concerns employ 30 percent of workers aged 60 and over. Proportions in sales and services are also relatively high, perhaps reflecting the importance of tourism for the island economy.

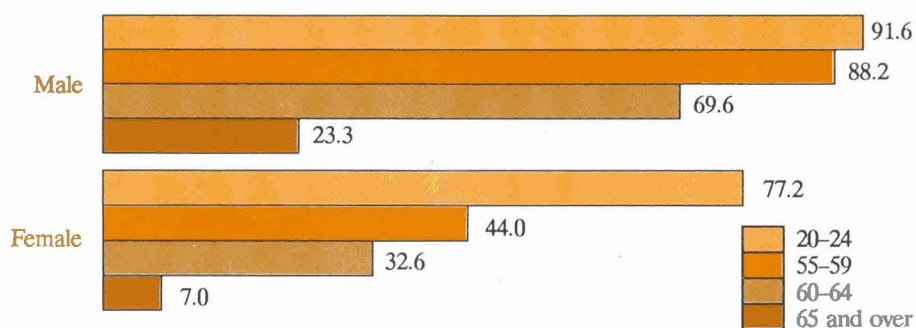
Barbados presently has a higher elderly support ratio (the number of persons aged 65 and over per 100 persons in the economically productive age range 20 to 64 years) than the vast majority of other developing nations. However, as seen in figure 5, this ratio will decline by about 25 percent over the next two decades. The relative increase in working-age population suggests that Barbados may have an expanded tax base to draw upon when designing or broadening social service programs. After 2010, planners can look forward to a steep rise in the elderly support ratio as the high fertility cohorts of the mid-twentieth century begin to reach age 65. This same sharp rise is anticipated in the United States and to a lesser extent in many Caribbean nations.

**Table 4.**  
**Occupational Distribution of Labor Force in Selected Age Groups: 1980**  
(In percent)

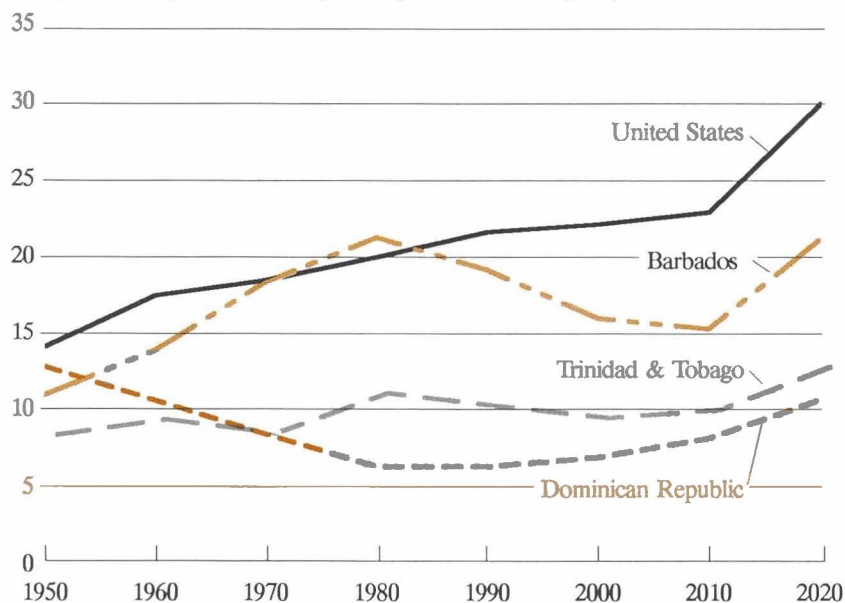
Age	Agriculture	Sales	Production	Service	Prof/Admin.	Other
20 to 24	6.7	8.6	42.1	12.1	10.0	20.5
55 to 59	15.9	10.5	35.3	21.3	10.7	6.3
60 and over	24.1	15.9	29.6	18.4	7.7	4.3

Source: Caribbean Community, No date, Volume 2, Table 2.4.1.

**Figure 4.**  
**Labor Force Participation Rates, by Sex: 1980**



**Figure 5.**  
**Elderly Support Ratios: 1950 to 2020**  
(Persons 65 years and over per 100 persons 20 to 64 years)



## INCOME and LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

As in most societies, the lack of adequate data makes it difficult to assess the relative economic well-being of elderly Barbadians. One analysis of income, which compared national data from the 1978/79 Household Budgetary Survey with information from a 1982 survey of the elderly, found that while one-third of the total population had average weekly incomes of less than \$105 (BDS), more than 90 percent of persons aged 65 and over were below this level. Fifty-five percent of the elderly reported receiving less than \$30 per week. Not surprisingly, lower income was associated with higher age, female gender, and lower educational attainment. The study concluded that there is a high degree of relative poverty among the elderly in Barbados.

On the other hand, 1982 survey data indicate that 82 percent of the elderly own their own homes, compared with 70 percent of the general population. Another

9 percent of the elderly live in rent-free dwellings. Interestingly, those persons over age 75 and those with lower education are more likely to own their residences.

More than three-quarters of the elderly receive a pension (table 5), an extraordinarily high percentage by developing-country standards. However, the bulk of recipients received \$30 a week or less from this source. Slightly more than a third of survey respondents reported income from earnings and/or relatives.

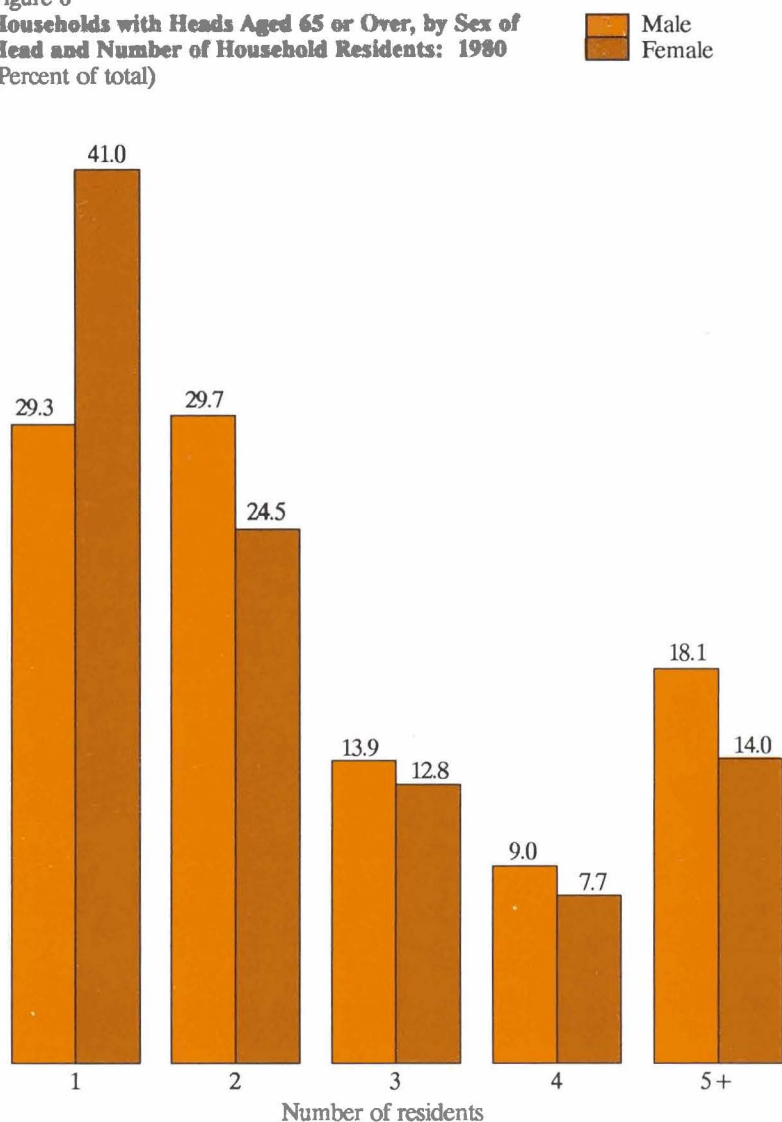
**Table 5.**  
**Sources of Income Among the Elderly: 1982**

Source	Percent receiving
Earnings	34.4
Pension	76.0
Relatives	34.2
Friends	8.4
Other	13.0

Source: Brathwaite, 1986, Table 2.6.

A high percentage of elderly Barbadians live alone. For heads of household aged 65 or older, the 1980 census found that 35 percent live by themselves, with the proportion higher among women than men (figure 6). The 1982 survey reported a lower sole-residency figure of 27 percent for all elderly persons, which is still high by most standards—the current figure for the United States is 30 percent. At the other end of the scale, roughly 1 in 4 elderly Barbadians live in households of 4 or more persons; men are more apt than women to reside in multi-person units.

**Figure 6**  
**Households with Heads Aged 65 or Over, by Sex of Head and Number of Household Residents: 1980**  
(Percent of total)



## REFERENCES

Brathwaite, Farley (editor). 1986. *The Elderly in Barbados*. Bridgetown.

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Pan American Health Organization. 1986. *Health Conditions in the Americas 1981–1984*. Vol. 1. Washington, DC.

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