

Preface

The goal of the Policy Roundtable entitled “Aging in the Americas: Critical Social Policy Issues” is to bring together individuals with unique perspectives on the problems and challenges of caring for an increasingly ethnically diverse dependent population. The papers examine the numerous factors that influence the economic security of families in the United States and Mexico as they face the burdens of caring for children and the old. The presenters examine the impact of Hispanic ethnicity and explore the consequences of population processes, including migration, on the formulation of U.S. and Latin American old-age policies. They investigate the evolution of the modern welfare state, summarize changing patterns of intergenerational transfers, and discuss the future role of federal entitlement programs. The objective of the conference is to better understand the policy implications of racial/ethnic diversity for the health and welfare of individuals in different social classes. Participants will discuss methodological issues involved in comparative social and policy research involving the United States and Latin America. They will deal with the issue of translation. By now we realize that we cannot simply translate research instruments validated in English into Spanish and expect to get valid information. Translation must be accompanied by a clearer understanding of the culture of interest, and of the response tasks presented to respondents. Although some information can be directly assessed, other information, including that concerning health, social services, and medical care use, cannot.

A new initiative by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) echoes the conference theme:“It is now clear that American families face the constant problem of caring for their dependent young and old while keeping their families prosperous. Families face a large number of issues that affect the intergenerational allocation of resources. The timing of fertility, marriage and marital stability, employment and child care decisions all affect the economic status of families. Family wealth building strategies affect investments in both children and adults, and the health and development of children over their life course. Public policy is also compelled to balance the needs of young and old while adding to the nation's wealth. Changes to the age structure resulting from reduced fertility complicate this challenge. Private actions undertaken by families to accumulate and transfer resources up and down the generational ladder are greatly affected by public policy aimed at the either the young or old..... Changes in the public policy environment highlight the urgency of these questions; scientific opportunities resulting from developments in the study of family economic behavior pave[s] the way for answering them (Bachrach, 2001).”

Our thanks to funding by the LBJ School Janet F. Harte Lectureship. The Lectureship was established to honor Mrs. Harte who had a strong interest in population issues. We are also indebted to the generous support of the University of Texas at Austin Population Research Center, the Institute of Latin American Studies, Institute of Gerontology, the Center for Health Promotion and Research, and the Urban Issues Program.

Jacqueline L. Angel, Ph.D.
February 11, 2001