**Radical Life Extension**

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The United States — and indeed the world — is straining under the weight of an aging population, and that strain is only expected to grow.

Life expectancy at birth in this country at the turn of the 20th century was [nearly 50 years](http://www.aging.senate.gov/crs/aging1.pdf). According to the United States Census Bureau, it’s now over 78. And by 2050, it’ll be [over 80](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus11.pdf). Others estimate it could be even higher.

A [2009 report](http://www.agingsocietynetwork.org/millbank-research-press-release-12-14-09) by the MacArthur Research Network on an Aging Society estimated that by 2050 “life expectancy for females will rise to 89.2-93.3 years and to 83.2-85.9 years for males.”

One of the authors of the study, [S. Jay Olshansky](http://abcnews.go.com/Health/ActiveAging/humans-live-longer-2050-scientists-predict/story?id=9330511), a professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois, Chicago, said at the time: “The economic implications for the U.S. economy are huge. We estimated we would be spending $3.2 to $8.3 trillion more in today’s dollars than currently projected.”

The [Census Bureau projects](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-243.html) that the number of Americans over 65 will more than double by 2060.

And this top-heavy population pyramid may only become more warped. A 2009 study published in The Lancet predicts that more than half of babies born in 2000 in “countries with long life expectancies” will live past 100 years old.

All of this raises tricky economic and ethical questions about how a society survives and prospers when so many of its citizens are beyond what we currently conceive as working-age, and live longer in the twilight, when disease ravages the mind and body, and people are more likely to be dependent than independent.

For instance, think of the raging debates we are now having about entitlements in light of a rapidly aging population. How can they be shored up? Can they survive as currently constructed?

Think of the pension problems that cities like Detroit are experiencing. Will those pension liabilities become even more unsustainable as more people grow older?

Having examined Americans’ feelings about living substantially longer lives, the [Pew Research Center released a report](http://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/06/living-to-120-and-beyond-americans-views-on-aging-medical-advances-and-radical-life-extension/) on Tuesday titled “Living to 120 and Beyond: Americans’ View on Aging, Medical Advances and Radical Life Extension.”

Most Americans hadn’t heard of radical life extension, but as the report explained, it’s the prospect — raised by scientists, bioethicists and other experts — “that advances in biotechnology and other fields could slow down or turn back the biological clock and allow many humans to live to 120 years or beyond.”

When asked if they’d like to live to be 120, most Americans said no, but most said that their ideal life span was between 79 and 100 years old, higher than the current average life expectancy.

Half thought treatments allowing people to live to be 120 would be bad for society, while 4 in 10 thought they would be good. Two-thirds thought that the treatments prolonging life would strain natural resources.

But aside from the economic and scarcity issues, there are ethical and theological issues.

Pew points out that longer life spans could have real effects on relationships and family structures, calling into question how and when people considered marriage and childbearing and care for the elderly.

And as they explain: “There are many ethical issues, too. At a very basic level, some fear life extension could fundamentally alter people’s sense of what it means to be human — and not for the better.”

How do people value life when death is increasingly delayed?

Before Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI, he led [a theological commission](http://www.crisismagazine.com/2009/superhuman-the-uncharted-territory-of-transhumanism) that wrote: “Disposing of death is in reality the most radical way of disposing of life.”

That’s one religious view, although there are [many others](http://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/06/religious-leaders-views-on-radical-life-extension/).

The point is that we are living longer and our life expectancies are predicted to keep rising. This presents real challenges for us as a society and an economy.