

The Impact of the Baby Boom on the Society in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The Baby Boom refers to the era of a group of Americans who were born from the 1940s to the 1960s. It is best known for large population growth, which certainly brought major effects from many perspectives to the United States. These influences existed since the first Baby Boomers born until today. This paper discusses specifically the impact of the Baby Boom from economic, suburbanization, and healthcare system perspectives.

Introduction

After WWII, most of the United States remained undamaged from destruction brought by the Axis powers, and the American economy experienced prosperity unlike other Allied nations where their cities were being bombarded or damaged. Meanwhile, American industries were innovating and improving the quality of their products, and according to a statement by the vice president Nixon in 1959 in an interview with Krushchev, he pointed out that, “the American system is designed to take advantage of new innovations.” With a thriving society, American families focused on growing their families by having more babies, leading to the growth of one of today’s biggest American populations. Scholars now have a consensus that people who were born during 1946 to 1964 were generally called baby boomers. The population experienced a surge and “there were actually a total of 76 million births in the United States from 1946 to 1964, the 19 years usually called the ‘baby boom.’” (Pollard & Scommegna, 2014). During this time, at least four million babies were born in each of the bumper-crop years from 1954-1964, the last real year of the baby binge. The influence of the sudden growth of this population led to many changes in society, especially economic growth, urbanization, and later health care systems.

Boomer’s Economy

Rising product sales

First, the large population of baby boomers created a need for products, spurring the market supply and innovation. The large population is the main contributing factor in consumerism. One important theory in the economy is to create demand for products, and larger populations mean larger demands. With the population, which is almost one third of today's American demographic, baby boomers created an astounding demand for everything. According to the”, the United States car sales were about 5,164,000 in 1951, then the number kept increasing until it reached its peak point at 11,424,000 in 1973. Long story short, In 1945, Americans owned 25 million cars; by 1965 the number had tripled to 75 million (1950s and 1960s control). In addition, annual domestic production of automobiles rose from two million in 1946 to eight million by 1955, while, according to the California Department of Transportation, motor vehicle registrations more than doubled, from about 26 million in 1945 to 54 million in 1956. Meanwhile,

some of the most popular products during the 1960s include the TV (Braun T3), Sunbeam Mixmaster, dolls, Uncle Milton's ant farm (The Best Selling, 2016). The buying trend implies the advancing technology, affluence of families, and the most noticeable is the sale volumes of dolls and toys, which implies the large number of newborns born during the 1960s.

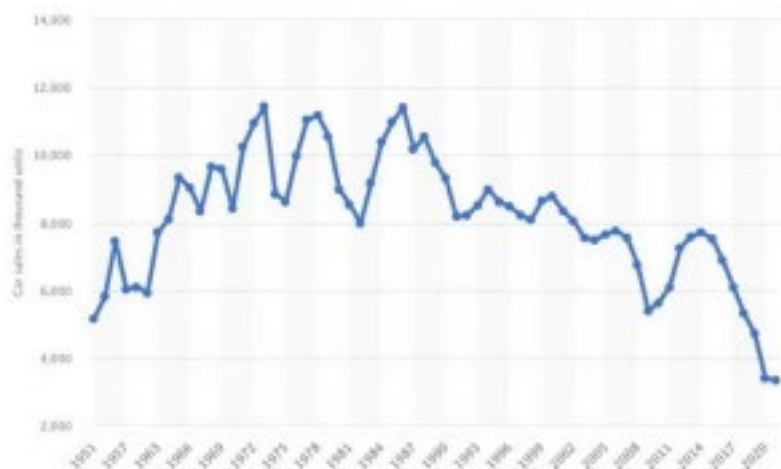


Figure 1: U.S. Car Sales from 1951 to 2020.

Accessed at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/199974/us-car-sales-since-1951/>

Elevating GDP and Decreasing Unemployment Rate

Population is important indeed, but if they are poor or the product is unaffordable to them, then they still cannot buy it. Imagine this condition: there are two counties, but one located near some main highways and the other located adjacent to mountains. The one near the highway is prosperous for tourism, while the other town located far from the highway lives on agricultural work. Gradually the first town accumulates and reaches an economic blossoming, while the second town remains nameless all the time. This applies for baby boomers and people born before it. While baby boomers enjoyed the vibrant domestic economic growth, the silent generation (generation before the boomers' generation) was experiencing the Great Depression, which in turn resulted in fewer job choices until 1941, when America needed more laborers to produce military products. According to Amadeo, the unemployment rate has skyrocketed from 3.2% in 1929, to 24.9% in 1933, and remained above 14% until 1940, when the Japanese air force struck Pearl Harbor and officially declared war with America. On the contrary, from 1964 to 1982, years between when the first and last batches of baby boomers were 18 years old, unemployment rate fluctuated between 3.4% in 1968 to 10.8% in 1982, generally below 12%. Similarly, according to Amadeo, the GDP, a measure for monetary value of produced goods and services in a country, was decreasing sharply during 1929 to 1933 due to the inflation of the dollar (about 29.3% decrease from 1929 to 1933). Then the American GDP increased sharply during 1934 to 1944 due to exports for goods and weapons for fighting against the axis powers. After the war during 1946 and 1982, though the GDP decreased at the beginning, later it increased steadily with a mean value of 3.09% every year (A. Julija).

Higher educational background

“After the war, prosperity led to an increasing percentage of enrolled students in both high schools and colleges” (*120 Years of Education*). During this time, due to the G.I. Bill (provides educational assistance), boomers especially benefited the most; boomers were having a higher education level than generations before, in which 88.8% of boomers completed high school, and 28.5% earned a bachelor's degree or higher degree (*What is the Baby Boom generation?*).

A person with a higher degree tends to have higher wages. For example, “Baby Boomers are most likely to have the highest-paying jobs, including Chief Medical Officer (CMO) (\$300,700), Psychiatrist (\$215,200), and Aerospace Engineer (\$122,800)” (Dan Schawbel, 2013). “Boomers represent 44% of the US population, and in the next 5 years, they’re projected to hold 70% of American disposable income and buy 49% of total consumer-packaged goods” (*Boomers to Control*). In addition, baby boomers have a higher average income than the silent generation who lived in the 1930s. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average income for people from all families who lived in the 1960, 70, 80, were \$48,274.69 and \$66,103.91 and \$70,653.41 respectively (equivalent to the value of today’s dollar). On the contrary, people who lived in the 1930s have an average income of \$1,368, which is only equivalent to \$22,656.17 (Flynn, 2020). Meanwhile, the large population shaped the picture of the United States objectively.

Drives for Suburbanization

Levitt & Sons

As the population grows, their need for social infrastructures like schools, houses, restaurants, and highways increases dramatically. After WWII, veterans went back home, and they enjoyed the welfare brought by the G.I. Bill (The Servicemen Readjustment Act of 1944). Those veterans wanted to settle down and create a life for themselves after the war, and growing families created a need for houses. Building houses for this large group was a challenge, since architects had to consider where to build, how to build, and what to improve and how to save money. After WWII, instead of living in metropolises, which were already crowded and which had limited job opportunities, people were moving to the suburbs. To deal with this domestic immigration, more places were planned for housing, and thus suburbanization, the expansion of suburbs, started to blossom. “In the decade following 1948, some 13 million homes were built in the United States; 11 million (85 percent) were built in the suburbs” (Digital History). Many people rushed to suburbs where, before World War Two, just 13% of Americans lived in; by 2010, however, suburbia was home to more than half of the U.S. population (Nicolaidis and Wiese 2017). The pioneer designer of architecture for suburbanization, William Levitt, sought the chance to design an affordable type of house. His father, his brother and he established Levitt & Sons in 1929, because they foresaw people’s urge to buy houses after the war. Though in 1929 the great depression doused people’s passion to buy houses, after the war, people were looking for places where they do not live in cities to avoid expensive real estate prices. Levitt seized the chance and in 1949 alone, the Levitts built 4,600 houses and sold them for a total of more than \$42 million (Entrepreneur). One of their famous initiatives is the construction on New York’s Long Island. Levitt started his construction on 2,000-acre former potato farmland 30 miles east of New York City, and according to Scheifman, the building company Levitt & Sons bought land on Long Island and constructed more than 17,000 homes in 1947.

“In 1950, Time Magazine estimated that Levitt & Sons built one out of every 8 houses in the United States. Levitt remained the nation’s largest home builder through most of the 1950s” (Building the Suburban Dream). Building communities at this scale would cost a huge amount of money, so Levitt developed an affordable housing design that ensures people can afford it: “The original design had two bedrooms and one bathroom, and a family could expand the house by converting the attic or adding on. Lots were of uniform size (sixty by one hundred feet) with a tree planted every twenty-eight feet (two-and-a-half trees per home)” (Gale, 1997). In fact, the house design can be identical for all houses in a community, so that sometimes people may lose their direction. “The average cost of such a house was about \$7,000 in the 1950s” (Olito, 2020). Thanks to the G.I. bill and the housing act of 1949, it was not hard for veterans to buy such a house. Though such compact housing may not compare well with today’s housing, for veterans who were born before WWII, such housing was “unimaginable luxuries” (The Growth of Suburbia).

Other Influences

Finally, the boomer generation influenced the suburbanization process greatly, which in turn led to the development of some policies, of which one of the most influential policies is the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. With the burdened road system before WWII, and the increasing rate of families owning a car, there was an urgent need for the stress on the interstate highway to be reduced. To do so, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the act in 1956, and “the authorization to build 41,000 miles of interstate highways marked the largest American public works program upto that time” (Congress approves the Federal-Aid Highway Act, 2019). Today, people do not have to suffer the pain of driving vehicles through dirt and mud, but rather on sturdy roads made of asphalt; the act sufficiently saved people’s traveling time, and it also fostered the founding of gas stations and other services along the highway. As a result, the large population sped up the formation of developed communities, consumerism, and the health care system. At this juncture, the United States population reached its peak, in which the aging baby boomers (about 21.45%, following 21.93% of the millennial generation), created unprecedented pressure on the previous health system.

Influence of Boomers on the Health Care System

Merits

After the war, America experienced a peaceful period of time, unlike the turbulent era before 1945. Without need for going to the battlefield and with the booming economy, developing technologies and growing happiness, life expectancy grows steadily:

At the turn of the 20th century, life expectancy at birth was only 46 years for men and 48 years for women. By midcentury, life expectancy was around 66 years for men and 71 years for women. In the most recent years, life expectancy has increased to 76 years for men and 81 years for women (Schanzenbach, D. W., 2016, June).

Besides economic improvement, this increase can also be attributed to health care system advances. Throughout the 20th century, many medicines and vaccines were invented. For example, a list of the recommended vaccines for children was first used in the 1940s, including vaccines for Smallpox, Diphtheria, Tetanus and Pertussis; after the 1940s, the list continued to include more vaccines that consist of more than 14 vaccines recommended for babies today (*Developments by year*, 2014).

Concerns One: Society Prospective

Though benefited by the merit of medicines, baby boomers also lead to some concerns. Currently, even the youngest boomers have reached fifty-seven, an age near retirement. It is a common fact that elders usually are the ones who have vulnerable constitutions, thus they take longer to recover from a disease, even a bruise from injury. Although many of them say that they continue to work, in fact the median retirement age for baby boomers is 87, higher than 82 of millennial generation and 80 of Gen X, according to the RSA survey (*Calculate retirement savings: Readiness score 2020*), it is undeniable that boomers are turning old, becoming fragile and needing more care. As baby boomers age, they are more likely to develop diseases like type 2 diabetes, heart diseases, cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, and depression (*Top Health Concerns for Baby Boomers*, 2021). Taking care of the large population needs a great deal of money; for instance, “By 2030, this number is expected to increase to 69.7 million. This will put Medicare’s annual acute care costs around \$259.8 billion in 2030” (The Baby Boomer Effect). Consequently, it will lead to more pressure on societal systems, especially the legal entity, the trust fund. A trust fund is designed to hold and manage assets on

someone else's behalf, with the help of a neutral third-party (Ganti, 2021). Given such a system, the trustee (boomers in this case) can receive a great amount of money when needed. The problem is the large population of the boomer generation, and when they need the money, the trust fund is likely to collapse:

The trust fund which provides for the payments has been steadily losing money over the last twenty years, as increasing numbers of the “Baby Boomer” generation have retired and gone onto their benefits. At pre pandemic estimates, the trust fund was set to run out of money by 2035 (Fliseth, 2021).

Concern Two: More Staff and Room Required

Meanwhile, even though many boomers are having a healthy life, some of them are (or will) not be entirely autonomous in their life, and they need someone to help them. However, their descendants are usually adults who need to work diligently to feed their kids and themselves, which means that they can hardly spend too much time on taking care of their old parents. Under such conditions, the nursing home is the ideal place where boomers are being sent to and cared for by professional staff members. But with the large boomer population, demand for taking care of elderly people needs to be dealt with by building more care facilities, which led to more money being used for building nursing homes and for training staff.

Moreover, although nursing homes created job positions for young adults, it is difficult to be licensed to be a nursing employee in these kinds of caring facilities. To work in nursing homes requires a high educational background. According to Gill, a nursing assistant may just need a high school diploma, but higher than that, the LPN (licensed practical nurses) and RN (Registered nurses) have to hold an associate or a bachelor’s degree in nursing (Gill, 2018). In addition, they need to be capable of a range of elaborate caring processes including patient care, home health, case analysis, treatment planning and diagnosis, etc. In addition to that, working in nursing homes requires staff to be amiable, outgoing, and considerate. Besides, challenges also include long working hours, physical and/or verbal harassment issues, and some health problems caused by overwork (Challenges in Nursing). Before more effective solutions are developed, to reduce the current pressure on taking care of the elderly, especially boomers, the government should pay more attention to and invest more money in caring facilities.

Conclusion

The baby boomers transformed society greatly and they are the ones who shaped how the United States’ many aspects (for example, transportation, housing, nursing care, policies) look like today. Consequently, today’s life is completely different from the early 20th century. Baby boomers are a group of people who shaped how we behave today, because most of them are still alive, and their kids, Generation X, are parents of the generation who are teens now. Ideology of baby boomers can be disseminated generation through generation, and ultimately influence how the United States looks and advances in the future.

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