

The Journal, 2021 Edition

By Peter Rundlet

Every era feels unprecedented, because indeed every era is. And yet there are some periods in history that are truly pivotal, those points during which virtually everything changes. They say that news articles are the first drafts of history; those of us living through these times know that something big is taking place, but we don't yet have the perspective to know how it will all settle.

That is the case today. We are floating through the rapids, enveloped by mist too thick for us to know where we are heading. And though each of us is living in our own turbulent world, the turbulence spans the globe: everyone, everywhere, is living or suffering through this storm in their own way.

Meanwhile, in seeming defiance of the present moment, more and more people are living past the age of 100, thanks to advances in health care and technology. There are people living today who were alive when women won the right to vote; when the Great Depression hit; during both World Wars, the Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan. These same people have also seen the rise and fall of Communism, the moon landings, and the creation of both the personal computer and the Internet. They have lived through the paradigm shift caused by 9/11 as well as the Great Recession. And today we continue to face challenging times in America and around the world. We are witnessing increasing racial strife and political division, the resurgence of authoritarian governments, growing economic inequality, and the undeniable effects

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of climate change. On top of all of that we have the seemingly unending COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has been an almost unmitigated disaster. At the time of this writing, the United States had surpassed 800,000 deaths — and more than 5.3 million people have died of COVID globally. At both home and abroad the statistics are the same: approximately 75 percent of the people who have died were ages 65 years and older. And so, it seems, the pandemic does discriminate. Moreover, in the United States, the impact of Covid was devastatingly worse for Black people, indigenous communities, and other people of color.

But despite all of the tragedy, our collective resilience demonstrated that we could shift nearly everything in our lives to fight the virus and reduce harm. Seemingly overnight, we reordered our lives. Much of the workforce went home and did their jobs from there, all while caring for family members and teaching kids, often at the same time. And those essential workers who had to endanger themselves to do their jobs were recognized as everyday heroes. The world's scientists acted with remarkable speed to invent vaccines and create cures, and — though there was room for improvement — countries collaborated to share information, resources, and vaccines to stem the reach of the coronavirus.

In so many ways, the pandemic has been an exercise in empathy for us all. It's as if we've witnessed a collective epiphany, seemingly self-evident yet strikingly illusive: workers are human beings, with home lives and a multitude

of responsibilities. As home became our workplaces, employers and colleagues became more flexible and adaptive, finally accommodating the reality that so many of us have others to care for, especially during COVID. And we proved we could do it. The economy of the United States in particular has rebounded, even surpassing where it was before the pandemic by the second quarter of 2021. Today, unemployment is down and employers are actively searching for workers. We succeeded with an adaptive work environment.

So, we will recover — perhaps with a new perspective and a renewed recognition of what is important: our health, our loved ones, our community, our time. And though COVID has dented our progress on life expectancy, collectively we are living longer, healthier lives (though it is critical to recognize that there are huge disparities in who is living longer; we are not aging equally).

Consequently, the focus of our work at AARP this past year — and indeed in this 14th edition of *The Journal* — was on how to maximize the opportunity that healthy longevity affords us. At the end of last year, the UN General Assembly formally designated 2021-2030 as the Decade of Healthy Ageing, inviting stakeholders across the world to identify and amplify promising practices and policies that improve the lives of older people, their families, and their communities. In particular, the Decade focuses on four interconnected action areas: (1) promoting age-friendly environments; (2) combatting ageism and age discrimination; (3) delivering person-centered

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integrated care to older persons; and (4) improving access to long-term care.

Our readers will see that we dedicated a significant portion of this edition to sharing the insights of thoughtful experts on each of these areas. Jo Ann Jenkins, CEO of AARP, frames the issues and the critical work being done by AARP globally in her opening essay. And Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, builds on this by making the case for the Decade of Healthy Ageing. The subsections include thought-provoking articles from Kim McCoy Wade, Director of California's Department on Aging; Ken Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch; Martha Boudreau, Chief Communications Officer at AARP; Terry Fulmer, President of the John A. Hartford Foundation; and several leading professors and policymakers from around the world, among others.

For the past several years, *The Journal* has included a deep exploration into the innovations of individual countries that have been particularly forward-looking with respect to their aging populations. The most recent issues have featured Japan, the Netherlands, and Singapore, all developed with the invaluable ingredient of visits to the featured countries that provided the opportunity to learn, engage, and build relationships. To be sure, these fact-finding trips have created extraordinarily rich exchanges between AARP and our foreign partners.

This year, however, like the rest of the world, we were forced to stay home. Yet within the newly

established boundary lines we took inspiration to do something different. We decided to focus on developments in a region perhaps not as frequently discussed in the aging-issue context because it is not among the oldest — yet it is one that is among the fastest aging regions in the world: Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Though the aging of populations in Asia and Europe has been more widely recognized and studied, birth rates across Latin America have been consistently declining since the 1960s, and in 2015, the average number of births across the region fell below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per mother for the first time. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) projects that the number of adults over age 65 in the region will outnumber the number of children under 15 by 2050.

This edition describes some of the key dynamics for the aging populations in five LAC countries — Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Mexico — and includes key demographic data for seven more: Argentina, Barbados, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Peru, and Uruguay. We are pleased to share articles from thought leaders such as Cecilia Morel Montes, the First Lady of Chile; Dr. Julio Frenk, current President of the University of Miami and former Minister of Health in Mexico; as well as several experts from the Inter-American Development Bank, and others. We are excited about what we have found in the region — and, in fact, we expect to delve even more deeply into its issues and solutions as we go forward.

Finally, we zoomed out to the global level so we could highlight some of the incredible small and feisty organizations around the world that are working hard and with limited resources to improve the lives of older adults. In a new feature we call “Newsmaker Interviews,” we highlight the work of three of these organizations — from El Salvador, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Philippines. We hope you take a look — and let us know about the work of other great organizations around the world.

We end 2021 as we began it — under the cloak of COVID-19, but resilient and optimistic for the future. We celebrate the fact that, just as the pandemic is not confined to borders, neither are good ideas. This edition of *The Journal* reflects that truth on each page. We continue to be inspired by the novel thinkers, the builders, and the dreamers who are working to create a better world for older people everywhere. As we continue to go forward, we will seek these ideas and share them, both here and online at www.aarpinternational.org. We want the best ideas to spread and expand. Because when communities are better for older people, they are better for everyone. ●



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