

THE GENERATIONAL EQUITY DEBATE

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Debates over the meaning of "generational equity" and the implications for consumers of all ages have evolved in this country. This roundtable was designed to stimulate discussion about current and projected research and educational roles in relation to the issue. The facilitator provided insight into educational programming relating to generational equity issues sponsored by the Minnesota Extension Service. Participants shared examples of specific policy issues, research projects, and educational efforts.

INTRODUCTION

"Generational equity" and "intergenerational inequity" have become catch-all slogans for a number of societal concerns and are being used as arguments for change in policies affecting individuals of all ages. In a society with limited resources, controversy has evolved regarding the proportion of public resources that certain age groups are receiving as well as how certain age groups are faring in our society. Are those over 65 receiving a disproportionate share of resources in comparison to the young? In comparison to the have-nots?

What criteria should guide the decisions that are made about limited resources in a society with changing demographic profiles? Who are the needy in our society? Are resources going to the most vulnerable or needy? Should resources be distributed on the basis of age and/or need? What are the appropriate roles of government, the private sector, and family in responding to individual and family needs? If one agrees that the generations are interdependent, then what views should guide policy development? These questions provide the basis for much discussion.

Debates over the meaning of "generational equity" and what, if anything, ought to be done in response have evolved in this country since 1986. Americans for Generational Equity membership is growing, children and family issues are in the forefront in many state legislatures, the Medicare Catastrophic Act has passed and been partially repealed, and generational impact studies are being produced.

RESEARCH AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

How the debates and responses are framed will have important implications for individuals and families across

the life span. Discussion of the role that researchers and educators are or could be playing to contribute to defining the issue and responses is needed. How do family economists, consumer educators, and other professionals contribute to an understanding and/or misunderstanding of resource allocation and economic well-being concerns? What research and educational projects are addressing generational equity issues either explicitly or implicitly? There are critical needs to further: 1) understand the economic diversity of the elderly and non-elderly populations; 2) determine the implications of changing demographic profiles for families, communities and society; 3) develop measurements of "equity"; and 4) understand the flow of resources to and from consumers and government programs (for all age groups, at points in time as well as over the life cycle).

In addition, educational programming needs to be developed to help defined target audiences understand generational equity issue and concerns. The Minnesota Extension Service offers some examples of how community leaders can be targeted as a key audience to learn about the issue. Educational materials on generational equity as an overall issue and long term care as an intergenerational issue have been developed which clarify the problem, offer varied viewpoints on the issue, and define questions leaders should be asking when considering alternatives.

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