



# FRAME WORKS INSTITUTE



## “Talkin’ Bout My Generation”

Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and  
Public Understandings of Demographic  
Change in the U.S.

**A FRAMEWORKS RESEARCH REPORT**  
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## I. Introduction

This Map the Gaps Report contributes foundational research to inform the work of the Generations Initiative and Next Generation. The goal of FrameWorks' comprehensive research process is to design and test communications tools that can be used to broaden public understanding of effective responses to demographic transformations in the U.S. and, in turn, to increase public support for the policies and programs necessary to leverage these transformations towards the collective benefit of all Americans. The tools that result can be used by experts, advocates and policymakers seeking to communicate about demographic change and generational interdependence to reframe relationships among older and younger generations and build support for policies that benefit all generations. This report constitutes a first step toward this more ambitious goal.

It should come as no surprise that the public brings a powerful set of cultural models — implicit, but shared, understandings, assumptions and patterns of reasoning — to thinking about demographic change in the U.S. and the country's ethnic and generational profiles. Importantly, this research shows that many aspects of public understanding — including those models that dominate people's thinking and those that are lacking from their thinking — impede the efforts of organizations working to construct a policy environment that responds productively to the demographic transformations currently under way. This report provides research-based recommendations to inform the scope and focus of future communications in this field by comparing ways that members of the public reason about demographic change in the U.S. to the ways that experts view this issue. In documenting these two perspectives, and enumerating the gaps and overlaps between them, we chart a course for communications to pursue in helping ordinary people think more productively about the changing generational and ethnic profile of the nation, and in considering how public policy should respond to these changes.

## II. Summary of Findings

### **The Expert View of Demographic Change and Generational Interdependence**

The following points emerged from the analysis of interviews conducted with experts on demographic change and intergenerational interdependence. Together, these points constitute an “untranslated story” — or the gist of what experts on these issues wish to be able to communicate to members of the public.

- Experts explained that the population of the U.S. is becoming older and more racially and ethnically diverse, and that older adults are living longer and healthier lives. They emphasized that these changes intersect with each other and with other demographic trends, such as urbanization, changing family structures, and increases in racial intermarriage.
- Experts asserted that these changes matter because demographic groups are economically, functionally and socially interdependent, and that the success of the country depends on all groups doing well.
- Experts noted a number of challenges and opportunities associated with the demographic changes currently under way in the U.S. They explained that, over the coming decades, the younger workforce will need to support a growing older population, and that current inequalities between demographic groups threaten economic growth and prosperity. At the same time, experts maintained that each generation has particular assets that can serve as resources for other generations and drive economic growth.
- Experts explained that policymaking is a critical tool in ensuring that current demographic changes strengthen our collective social, economic and civic well-being. They suggested that policies should invest in human capital *across* the life course, and cautioned that a long-term perspective is critical to effective policymaking.

## The Public View of Demographic Change and Generational Interdependence

The American public draws on a complex set of shared and implicit understandings to make sense of demographic change and the generational and ethnic profiles of the U.S. Chief among these are the following:

- Patterns of ethnic change and generational change are cognitively compartmentalized and thought of as separate topics. The public lacks a model for considering the integrated nature and consequences of the “greying” and “browning” of America.
- Generational fates are also thought of as separate. The welfare of today’s older Americans is not thought of as fundamentally intertwined with that of today’s youth, and vice-versa. Instead, generational fates are considered to be on divergent trajectories. One important result is that most members of the public do not understand the generational contours of current national- and state-level policy debates about public resource allocation.
- The demographic changes currently transforming the United States are thought of as large and immovable forces. There is an assumed inevitability to these changes, for better or for worse, and public policy is not looked to as an arena of action and efficacy.

## Overlaps in Understanding

There were a number of areas where expert and public understandings overlapped. These points of overlap are areas that communicators can leverage in expanding public understanding and creating effective messages.

- 1. Growing Diversity Enriches Cultural and Economic Life:** Both experts and members of the public share a recognition that the country is becoming more diverse, and both groups hold a positive model of that diversity as enriching the nation both culturally and economically.
- 2. The Country is Becoming More Tolerant:** Both experts and members of the public believe the country is becoming more tolerant and that this trend represents a positive trajectory.
- 3. Older People are Living Longer:** Both experts and the public recognize that older Americans are living longer lives now than in previous generations, although — unlike experts — members of the public exhibit little interest in, or awareness of, the broader implications of this trend.
- 4. All Generations are Facing Economic Challenges:** Experts and the public recognize that the modern American economy places significant strain on old and young Americans alike.
- 5. The Future of Social Security is Uncertain:** Both experts and the public are concerned about the future viability and stability of Social Security benefits, although they differ in

the extent to which they see the potential for meaningful reforms to strengthen the program.

6. **Older Generations Have Both Assets and Responsibilities:** Experts and members of the public agree that older Americans have valuable stores of skills, knowledge and wisdom, and a responsibility to leave a positive legacy for future generations.
7. **Older and Younger Generations Typically Lead Separate Lives:** Both experts and the public recognize that older Americans' daily lives are often segregated from broader public life, and from the lives of children and youth in particular.
8. **Community is the Locus of Interaction:** Both experts and the public identify community-based opportunities for intergenerational collaboration.

## Gaps in Understanding

There are also notable gaps between expert and public understandings, which impede the public's ability to access expert perspectives on demographic change. These gaps represent targets for reframing strategies. Notable gaps include the following:

1. **Demographic Trends: Integrated vs. Compartmentalized.** Experts are highly attuned to the intersection of changes in the country's generational and ethnic profiles, and to the implications of that intersection for the country, while the public's compartmentalized perspective leaves these intersections unrecognized.
2. **Ethnic Diversity: Benefit vs. Threat.** While experts view ethnic diversity primarily in positive terms, the public is much more ambivalent about the effects of diversity and, in particular, of immigration.
3. **Unit of Analysis: Population vs. Family.** Experts easily consider questions of generational change, responsibility and interdependence at the population level, while the public's strong default is to think about these topics at the individual family level.
4. **Fates of Different Generations: Linked vs. Separate.** Experts view the fates of generations as inextricably linked, asserting that elderly segregation brings with it a cost to society. The public, on the other hand, lacks a robust model of population-level generational interdependence.
5. **Age Structure of the Country: Getting Older vs. Getting Younger.** While experts note that the country is currently aging overall, the public is split on their level of knowledge about this trend, with the default guess being that the nation is getting younger.
6. **Age: Life-Course Perspective vs. Binary Structure.** Experts adopt a life-course perspective in talking about the interdependencies that run across generations. The public, meanwhile, is much more likely to focus attention on the young and the old at either end of the spectrum.
7. **Orientation: Forward vs. Backward.** While experts are focused on the macro-scale policy changes necessary to best leverage our changing demographics, public thinking is subject to a strong nostalgia that looks back to a "lost village," and wishes for a return

to a simpler time.

- 8. Allocation of Resources Across Generations: Critical Policy Question vs. Invisible Consideration.** Experts recognize that demographic trends in the U.S. represent a challenge for public resources, with an aging baby boomer generation requiring substantial health care and income security dependent upon a smaller working-age population. The public, meanwhile, is largely not attuned to the generational contours of these resource challenges.
- 9. Relationships Among Generations: Assets vs. Contrasts.** Experts focus on the various assets that different generations bring to our collective experience. The public's default models, on the other hand, center on the positives and negatives of each generation, and often identify the strength of one (youthful open-mindedness) in terms of its negative contrast in the other (older people's closed-mindedness).
- 10. Demographic Change: Policy Problem vs. Simple Fact.** Experts maintain that smart policymaking is critical to positively leveraging our country's changing demographics, while, with the exception of immigration, the public does not see our nation's changing demographics as a public policy issue but more a natural occurrence.

### III. Research Methods

#### Expert Interviews

To explore and distill expert messages on demographic change and generational interdependence, FrameWorks researchers conducted 12 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with researchers, advocates and policy experts working on these issues. These interviews were conducted in July and August 2103 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. FrameWorks compiled the list of interviewees in collaboration with a panel of advisors. The final list was designed to reflect the diversity of disciplines and perspectives involved in work on demographic change and generational interdependence.

Expert interviews consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture expert understandings about how the demographic makeup of the country is changing; the challenges and opportunities presented by these changes; the relationships and interdependencies that exist among different demographic groups; and relevant policy implications. In each interview, the interviewer went through a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios designed to challenge expert informants to explain their research, experience and perspectives, break down complicated relationships, and simplify concepts and findings from the field. Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that, in addition to preset questions, interviewers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification, and encouraged experts to expand upon those concepts that they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach. Common themes were pulled from each interview and categorized, and negative cases were incorporated into the overall findings within each category, resulting in a refined set of themes that synthesized the substance of the interview data. The analysis of this set of interviews resulted in the drafting of an initial summary of expert perspectives on demographic change and generational interdependence.

These results were then presented to group of experts working on issues of demographic change at a “feedback” convening in November 2013. At the meeting, experts engaged with the emerging untranslated story — refining, winnowing and building out its constituent messages. The results presented below are the synthesis of data gathered from both expert interviews and the “feedback” convening.

#### Cultural Models Interviews

**Informants:** The cultural models findings presented below are based on 20 in-depth interviews conducted in four locations in the United States: Omaha, Neb.; Chicago, Ill.; Santa Monica, Calif.; and Frederick, Md., in October and November 2013.

A sizable sample of talk, taken from each of our informants, allows us to capture the broad



sets of assumptions — cultural models — that informants use to make sense and meaning of information. Recruiting a wide range of people and capturing a large amount of data from each informant ensures that the cultural models we identify represent shared patterns of thinking about a given topic. Although we are not concerned with the particular nuances or differences in the cultural models between different groups at this level of the analysis (an inappropriate use of this method and its sampling frame), we recognize and take up this interest in subsequent research phases.

Informants were recruited by a professional marketing firm and were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, residential location (inner city, outer city and regional/rural areas up to three hours from city center), educational background (as a proxy for class), political persuasion (as self-reported during the screening process), religious involvement and family situation (married, single, with children, without children, age of children).

The sample included 13 women and seven men. Twelve of the 20 informants self-identified as “white,” four as “black,” and four as “Hispanic.” Eleven informants described their political views as “Middle of the Road,” six as “Liberal” and three as “Conservative.” The mean age of the sample was 42 years old, with an age range from 21 to 63. Two informants were high school graduates, six had completed some college, nine were college graduates, and three had postgraduate education. Eight of the 20 informants were married, and 12 were the parent of at least one child.

**Interviews:** Informants participated in one-on-one, semi-structured “cultural models interviews” lasting two to two-and-a-half hours. Cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues — in this case, whether, and how, they think the U.S. population is changing and what that means for the country, what characterizes relationships across generations and ethnic groups, and what can be done to improve those relationships. As the goal of these interviews was to examine the cultural models that informants use to make sense of, and understand, these issues, it was key to give them the freedom to follow topics in the directions they deemed relevant. Therefore, the researchers approached each interview with a set of areas to be covered but left the order in which these topics were covered largely to the informant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Analysis:** FrameWorks’ researchers adapted analytical techniques employed in cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how informants understand issues related to demographic change.<sup>1</sup> First, we identified common, standardized ways of talking across the sample to reveal organizational assumptions, relationships, logical steps and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual’s transcript and across the sample. In short, our analysis looked at patterns both in what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was not said (assumptions). In many cases, analysis revealed conflicting models that people brought to bear on the same issue. In such cases, one of the conflicting ways of understanding is typically given more weight than the other. FrameWorks researchers use the concepts of “dominant and recessive models” to capture the differences in the cognitive weight given to

these conflicting models.

Data gathered from these extended interviews were supplemented with an additional set of 30, 10-minute on-the-street interviews conducted in Annapolis, Md., and Boston, Mass., in early December 2013.

Below, we first present the expert messages that comprise an *untranslated* expert account of demographic change and generational interdependence in the U.S. This is followed by an analysis of the cultural models that members of the public bring to understanding these issues. We then compare these expert and public understandings and identify key overlaps and gaps. We conclude with a set of recommendations and areas of future research.

## IV. Research Findings

### The Expert View

Below, we present a distillation of the themes that emerged from the analysis of expert interviews and review of data gathered at an expert feedback session. These themes are organized along a set of five questions.

#### How is the demographic make-up of the United States changing?

- **The population is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse.** Experts described how the population of the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, explaining that, over the next several decades, the proportion of Latinos, Asian Americans, African Americans and other racial/ethnic groups will grow while the proportion of Caucasians will decline. They also emphasized that trends towards growing racial and ethnic diversity are not being driven by immigration, but by the children of immigrants. As one expert put it, increasing diversity in the racial and ethnic make-up in the United States population is now “baked into the cake.”
- **The population is aging, and older adults are living longer and healthier lives.** Experts explained that, as the baby boomer generation ages, the proportion of the population that is age 65 or older is increasing. These older generations are leading longer and healthier lives than ever before, and, as a result, are faced with new questions: Is traditional “retirement” financially feasible, given the number of years likely to be lived post-retirement? If so, how should post-retirement years be spent so as to maintain a sense of purpose, productiveness and fulfillment?
- **These changes intersect with each other and with other demographic changes.** Experts rarely discussed demographic change in terms of single, isolated variables. Instead, they emphasized the intersections between (1) shifts in the age distribution of the population and (2) its racial/ethnic breakdown — specifically, younger generations tend to be more racially and ethnically diverse than their older, whiter counterparts. In addition to the trends in age and race, experts noted other types of demographic change currently under way in the United States — such as urbanization, increases in single-parent families, growing income inequality, and increasing trends toward racial inter-marriage.

#### Why do these changes matter?

- **Generations are economically and functionally interdependent.** Experts were consistent in asserting that generations are interdependent, and described multiple ways in which such interdependence is expressed. They explained that younger generations depend on older generations to support their education and early development. These investments in the healthy development and education of younger generations build the productivity of the workforce that will, in turn, support older

generations in their later years. In short, experts maintained that our country's future growth and prosperity depend on *all* demographic groups doing well.

- **Generations are socially and experientially interdependent.** In addition to their instrumental interdependence, experts also maintained that intergenerational relationships and connections enrich our collective experience. They compared connections across generations to the connections that exist among family members of different ages, emphasizing that these connections benefit both the young and the old alike and broaden people's social worlds in ways that prevent isolation and bring out the "intrinsic pleasure" of meaningful relationships. As one expert put it, there are "joys associated with an intergenerational world" that are not easily quantifiable — that is, they can't be reduced to a "return on investment" — but are just as valuable.
- **"Everybody's young and everybody's old."** Experts explained that the concerns of one generation should matter to all generations because, put simply, "everybody's young and everybody's old at some point in their lives." According to experts, it is therefore in everyone's best interest to invest in policies and programs that support all generations and that consider people's particular needs at each stage of the life course.

### **What are the benefits associated with these changes?**

- **Demographic change drives economic growth.** Experts explained that demographic change has been an integral part of our country's history and its economic success. Building on this historical perspective, they emphasized that the United States has undergone significant demographic shifts in the past, driven largely by immigration, and that immigrant populations have contributed enormously to our economic prosperity. They argued that, if addressed through smart policymaking, the demographic transformation currently under way could yield similar collective benefits.
- **Each demographic group has particular assets.** Experts asserted that the benefits of demographic change can be traced to the particular assets that characterize different demographic and generational groups. They emphasized, in particular, the aspirational energy, entrepreneurial spirit, inclusivity and tolerance of younger and more diverse generations, and explained that these characteristics can strengthen our civic life and collective prosperity. Similarly, experts asserted that the growing number of older adults represents an expanding source of wisdom, time and experience that can be leveraged to support younger generations and families.

### **What are the challenges associated with these changes?**

- **The younger workforce will need to support a growing older generation.** Experts described particular challenges posed by the aging of the baby boomer generation. The working-age population will need to support an increasingly large older population, and there will be substantial expense associated with meeting the health care and

income security needs of older generations. Experts also noted that the aging population may require us to rethink other aspects of both public and private systems, such as the ways in which public infrastructure and consumer products are designed, and the delivery of health care.

- **Substantial inequalities exist between demographic groups.** Experts identified inequalities between different demographic (and particularly racial and ethnic) groups with respect to health, education, economic and vocational outcomes as a critical challenge associated with demographic change. According to the expert perspective, if these inequalities are allowed to persist without policy intervention — that is, if the same types of public policy supports that were made available to earlier generations are not made available to younger, diverse generations today — future economic growth and prosperity will decline.
- **Both younger and older generations are facing financial hardships.** Experts emphasized that current economic hardships are affecting all generations. They explained, for example, that young people are increasingly burdened by educational debt and lower earnings and that, as a result, it can be very challenging for young people to “get a toe-hold” in the current economy and establish a middle-class existence. At the same time, they described how many older adults are struggling to afford retirement and health care — and are continuing to work well beyond what used to be the typical retirement age out of economic necessity.

## What are the policy implications of these changes?

- **Good public policy is critical.** Experts repeatedly emphasized that public policy is critical to addressing the challenges associated with demographic changes and leveraging the benefits associated with these changes. Put another way, they explained that we are at a sort of crossroads — and that the extent to which we implement effective public policies to address these challenges will ultimately determine whether they end up strengthening or weakening our collective social, civic and economic well-being.
- **Good public policy should leverage generational assets and advance *all* generations.** Experts emphasized that each generation has particular assets and strengths that can enrich the experiences of other generations — and that policy decisions should be made with these assets in mind. This asset-based perspective was pervasive throughout experts’ talk, and represented a fundamental orientation towards understanding the role of public policy in addressing demographic change. That is, experts asserted that public policies are most effective in promoting our collective prosperity and well-being when they invest in human capital across the life course and help *all* generations. Although experts’ talk was less focused on *specific* policies than on the overarching principles that should guide policymaking, many did describe the need for investments in early education and job training, paid family leave and caregiver support, greater workforce flexibility, and policies that ensure adequate health care and income for people of all ages.

- **Good policymaking requires a long-term perspective.** Experts emphasized that investments in younger generations accrue benefits and cost-savings that may not be felt immediately — but that, by investing in younger generations, we strengthen the health and productivity of these generations in the future. More broadly, they maintained that policy actions to address current demographic changes should be based not on short-term needs, but should be guided by “what kind of a country we want to be and what we want our children and grandchildren to have when they grow up.”
- **It’s not a zero-sum game.** While experts acknowledged certain resource constraints, they largely rejected the premise of a “shrinking pie” — arguing, instead, that smart policymaking can advance the interests of all generations. Experts asserted that investments in human capital (for example, investments in early education, job training, or even public infrastructure) “grow the pie” for all groups and all generations by expanding social and economic opportunity.
- **Public policy creates the structures and frameworks in which relationships across generations can grow ... but relationships are built in places and communities.** Experts emphasized that connections between generations are built at local and community levels through daily interactions and relationships — but noted that these interactions and relationships are structured by policy decisions. For example, urban planning policies that segregate older and younger generations by building “senior-only” communities make such connections more difficult, while those that focus on designing intergenerational spaces (such as mixed-use recreation centers that cater to all generations) serve to facilitate these interactions. Experts spoke of the need to promote policies that leverage the human need for intergenerational relationships and experiences.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the expert account presented above.

### Untranslated Expert Story of Demographic Change and Generational Interdependence

<p><b>What is changing?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Racial and ethnic composition:</i> The population is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse.</li> <li>• <i>Age composition:</i> The population is becoming older, and older adults are living longer and healthier lives.</li> <li>• <i>Intersecting changes:</i> These changes intersect with each other (younger generations are more racially/ethnically diverse than older, whiter generations) and with other trends (urbanization, changing family structures, increases in racial intermarriage).</li> </ul>	<p><b>What are the challenges and benefits associated with these changes?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Younger to support older:</i> Over the coming decades, the younger workforce will need to support a growing elderly population.</li> <li>• <i>Assets to offer:</i> Each generation has particular assets, and generations can serve as resources to one another.</li> <li>• <i>Economic growth:</i> Demographic change can drive economic growth.</li> <li>• <i>Inequalities threaten growth:</i> Substantial inequalities exist between groups; these inequalities threaten economic growth and prosperity.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Why do these changes matter?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Success of the country:</i> The success of the country depends on all demographic groups doing well.</li> <li>• <i>Success of each demographic group:</i> Demographic groups are economically, functionally, and socially interdependent and can benefit from each other’s strengths/assets.</li> <li>• <i>Intrinsic benefits:</i> Intergenerational relationships benefit younger and older groups alike and enrich collective social experience.</li> </ul>	<p><b>What are the policy implications associated with these changes?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Policymaking matters:</i> Approach to policymaking will determine whether demographic change strengthens or weakens collective social, economic, and civic wellbeing.</li> <li>• <i>Leverage assets:</i> Policy should invest in human capital across life course, leverage generational assets, and seek to advance all generations.</li> <li>• <i>Look long term:</i> Long-term perspectives are key. Investments in younger generations accrue benefits and cost-savings that, while critical, may not be immediately apparent.</li> </ul>

## The Public View

Below, we present a series of cultural models — shared assumptions and patterns of thinking — that guide and shape the American public's view of demographics in the country. These models represent the most prevalent and dominant conceptual constructs that organize public thinking around this domain.

We first describe four models that structure thinking about American society in general. These models provide an important backdrop for understanding the more specific patterns of thought that people apply to the domain of demographic change and generational interdependence. This more specific thinking is divided into four sections: models of the U.S.'s changing demographics; models of immigration and the country's changing ethnic profile; models of the country's generational profile; and models of solutions to the challenges posed by changing demographics.

### A. Models of American Society

Across the scope of our cultural models research with members of the American public, a number of generalized characterizations of American society consistently emerged. These models were largely structured in temporal terms, and reflect ideas about how American life has changed over the past half century. These models represent an important context for understanding how people think about demographic change, generational relationships, and the characteristics, attitudes and capacities that define different groups and ages of Americans.

**1. The *Dented American Dream Model*:** Informants consistently lamented the insecurity and instability of the modern American economy, worrying that the promises of prosperity and high quality of life that previous generations enjoyed are becoming increasingly elusive. Life has become busier and harder, according to this model, without the payoffs of earlier times.

**Informant:** *This is the first generation ever in America to not have salaries continue to increase. We are facing a new situation in America. Throughout all of American history, every subsequent generation has had an increase in their standard of living by any objective criteria over the previous generation. Generation X is the first generation in American history that has had a backslide, that the economic opportunities to succeed and thrive are fewer. And this is the first time in American history that that's happened.*

Notably, both young and older informants assumed that a well-earned, leisurely retirement is no longer a likely prospect for most people. Instead, there is a sense that adults today will find themselves working longer and harder just to pay the bills — often well into their older years.

**Informant:** *I went to a seminar and people were talking about your retirement income and IRAs. We're never going to be able to retire. We're going to have to work until we drop dead.*

A number of informants applied the model to think about Social Security, raising specific worries that the program and its promise will not be available to future generations.

**Informant:** *They don't have an income. All they have is social security, which, I don't even think is going to be around when I retire. It's scary.*

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**Informant:** *Well I don't think the social security system is going to be able to maintain. Maybe we will make some great invention like the silicone chip, maybe there will be boom times again, but unless there is something like that, it just can't sustain the system and it's going to be like the people in the '30s again. If the money is not there, the money is not there. It is a real thing.*

Similarly, there was a sense that breaking into steady work is increasingly difficult for young people because good jobs are increasingly hard to come by and economic conditions overall are poor.

**Informant:** *The young generation, sometimes they don't have any hope. They don't believe that if you work hard, it will pay off in the long run. You go through life and you see your parents struggling, and it's hard for them to get a job, you feel like, "What's your chances of getting one?" Even though it should be the total opposite. You should want to work hard and be able to afford different things, and give your family a better life ... So I think sometimes they just crush their spirits, so they just feel like, why do it?*

The *Dented American Dream* model is thus a model that is applied across the generational spectrum, speaking to a common dilemma faced by young and old alike.

**2. The Lost Village Model:** Informants exhibited nostalgia for a sense of neighborliness and community that once existed and has been lost. This model holds that, in the past, American communities were places where people knew and looked after each other and each other's families. In the "village" of the past, people understood that it was their responsibility to look after one another's children and were not afraid to step in and discipline them if necessary. Informants expressed profound regret for this felt loss of mutual concern.

**Informant:** *That thing of having neighbors know you and inspire your kids, that's gone now. And kids use a different level of respect out there. So that whole thing where I'm comfortable with my two daughters kind of just branching off ... the neighborhoods are just so different from when I grew up. It takes a village. But the village isn't there.*

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**Informant:** *A healthy neighborhood is a neighborhood that's old school ... it's a "it takes a village to raise a child" type of a community. The people in the neighborhood take a responsibility for the young people in the neighborhood. People in the*



*neighborhood are able to chastise the young people in the neighborhood. I'm going to tell your mom, and your mom is going to respect me and accept what I said as an adult and not take the side of the child when the parent wasn't there. "My child would never do that ..." People looking out for one another.*

This nostalgic model of a lost village is reflected in talk about people being either too busy or too self-absorbed to care how their neighbors are doing.

**Informant:** *Because people are working so much that they don't really have time to interact with their family members or senior citizens. And I remember, we knew every neighbor on the block growing up. Now I don't even think people talk to each other. They don't talk to their neighbors. They don't know who their neighbors are, and that's sad.*

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**Informant:** *People have died off and there's an influx of drugs, there's violence, people are afraid to speak up, people are so full of rage these days because of a lot of reasons. Economics, lack of money, communication, resources. And then people are, "Well I'm gonna mind my own business. You do whatever you want to do, [just] don't bother me." And then it just snowballs, where if nobody is concerned, everybody has blinders on ... you're not helping at all.*

**3. The *Modern Life is Unsafe Model:*** Linked to the notion of a lost village, many informants argued that modern life in America is less safe than it used to be, and that parents need to keep a closer watch on their children because of the number of people “out there” who would do them harm. This model was especially prevalent among middle-aged and older Americans. The end result is a sense that parents are — and need to be — holding their children a bit closer to home for their safety and protection.

**Informant:** *Sometimes we joke about how we used to walk ten blocks to our girlfriend's house. I still feel that the neighborhoods are safe, but sometimes I get nervous because you hear stories ... like, I wouldn't want my 10-year-old to be walking 10 blocks, but I did it. So I'm kind of scared because the world has changed. There's more crime ... I do think it's not as free. You can't leave your kids unattended.*

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**Informant:** *People are distrusting because bad things happen. People are scared to get involved and speak out. I guess that's a big change. To me, people are more fearful because of the crime. Such high crime. Such outrageous stories.*

**4. The *Cultural Progress model.*** Amidst concerns about the breakdown of community and increased financial struggles, there was a widespread sense among informants that the country is becoming progressively more accepting of racial, ethnic and sexual diversity. The acceptance of diversity is, according to this model, part of a gradual, inevitable process of cultural evolution and improvement. As older, more intolerant, generations are replaced by more enlightened younger generations, people reason, the broader culture becomes more and more accepting of difference.

**Informant:** *I think it's kind of happening everywhere. People are getting more open. I think people are just becoming more open to everything. I think that's just going to happen gradually.*

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**Informant:** *Culturally, it's going to be very different because the kids in their 20s now are more accepting of interracial relationships. My mother is not too bad, but my grandmother, it would have been just, "Oh my God!"*

This model includes the assumption that exposure to difference is often what leads to greater acceptance, and that, when confronted with people from different ethnic, racial or sexually oriented groups, people come to recognize that their prejudices are baseless. Likewise, the model holds that when exposed to other cultures, people come to recognize their value and see them as enhancing, rather than detracting, from their own experience — this model links directly with the positive model of ethnic and cultural diversity described later in this report.

**Informant:** *I think that as we are experiencing more rapidly accelerating cultural interplay ... That that's increasing complexity, people are now having to think outside of their normal cultural paradigms when they go to work, when they go to the gym, when they go to the market. You see somebody in a full burqa and you either have to run screaming and call Homeland Security, or you have to adapt and start saying, "Maybe that person isn't a terrorist." I think that enforced cultural mix is creating a perception of greater complexity socially. I think that we have a, not more complex society, but a more rapidly changing one.*

## Implications

1. *The Dented American Dream model lowers expectations and mutes willingness to engage with policy solutions.* The sense of pessimism embedded in this model — both for today's older Americans as well as for the generations that follow — feeds into fatalism, as discussed later in this report. When operative, it leaves people anxious about the future but highly skeptical that policy solutions can effect meaningful and lasting change.
2. *The Modern Life is Unsafe and Lost Village models create an overarching sense that American communities are frayed, and that individuals and families are left to find their own way in the world.* The sense of collective fear, and the idea that people just "mind their own business," hinders people's ability to envision intergenerational and multiethnic collaborations at the community level, even while their nostalgia for a lost village suggests an openness to stronger communities. Because the *Lost Village* model provides a blurry, unfocused picture of a yearned-for past, rather than a vision of real communities that can be designed, built and achieved, the model leaves people desiring community but lacking a concrete, grounded sense of what it would take to create stronger communities.

3. *The Cultural Progress model is promising for communications about demographic change.* This model provides an important leverage point by identifying the growing minority population of the U.S. in positive terms, as an attribute that allows us to continue to move forward and strengthen the nation.

## B. Models of Changing Demographics

**1. The *Compartmentalized Trends* model:** Informants shared the assumption that generational and ethnic demographic trends are unrelated. Informants saw these two patterns of change as distinct, rather than as interconnected or interdependent. This *Compartmentalized Trends* model can also be characterized as representing a “cognitive hole” in the public’s thinking and in our broader national discourse — an area where the public largely lacks a model for thinking about an issue. In this case, the “hole” is the integrated nature of the generational and ethnic changes happening in the country today, one characterized largely by the simultaneous “greying” (or aging) of white generations and “browning” of younger generations. In keeping with the compartmentalized nature of informants’ understanding, the following models of demographic change focus *either* on the shifting size of the country, on its age structure, *or* on its racial/ethnic profile — but do not combine these trends into an integrated concept of demographic change.

**2. The *Population Growth Model*:** The assumption that the U.S. population is growing, and growing dramatically, was a frequent first response to open-ended questions about demographic change in the country. In many cases, informants expressed concern that such growth threatens to overwhelm the American economy, increase job competition and stretch already limited public resources.

**Researcher:** *Is the population of the country as a whole changing?*

**Informant:** *I think it's increasing. I feel things are just booming, like, sprouting up and booming. I know people are dying, too, older people are dying. But I just feel like there's so many people being born all the time. I really think it's growing.*

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**Researcher:** *What about the population of the country?*

**Informant:** *It's getting bigger ... everything's getting bigger. It's getting bigger.*

**Researcher:** *Why do you think it's getting bigger?*

**Informant:** *I don't know. I keep saying I have no idea where these, all these people, are coming from.*

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**Researcher:** *So what effect does immigration have on this country?*

**Informant:** *Less jobs for us to have, more traffic. Less places to live. More population. Just more people that we don't need. No offense!*

**3. The *Second Baby Boom Model*:** Many informants shared the impression that the country’s population is growing because of an increased birth rate. They attributed this boom to couples having larger families, and to more people having children at younger ages.

**Informant:** *The actual birth rates are going up again, like a second baby boom.*

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**Informant:** *There's definitely a lot more people having babies, and I don't know what to look towards to explain that, but I just know that there are people having more babies than there were 50, 60 years ago. My mom and dad stopped at two, but I know people that are like, six and seven right now. Seven kids, and still going. My cousin has four and is trying to go for number five right now. It's just like, "Dude, why?"*

**4. The Latino Influx Model:** The growing proportion of Latino residents and the ubiquity of Spanish in public places was top of mind when informants were asked about the shifting demographic profile of the U.S. Most informants spoke to the trend in largely descriptive terms; however, some Anglo informants expressed discomfort with the increasing "Spanish-ization" of the country.

**Informant:** *I mean there's a lot more Hispanics in Omaha. The thing that pisses me off is that none of them learn English, but they still try to coexist within our city or state, but they won't learn English. And you go shopping in different places, and they just, "La, la, la, la," they're talking everywhere around you, and you don't know what they're saying.*

In addition to open-ended questions about how the U.S. population is changing, FrameWorks' researchers asked informants directly whether they thought the population of the country is getting older, younger or remaining stable overall. Many informants expressed uncertainty in response to this question. Some simply said they didn't know, while others hesitated before offering their "best guess" about what the macro trend might be. Among informants who answered, responses to this knowledge-based question were roughly evenly split between informants who knew that the country is getting older and those who believed the country is getting younger.

**5. The We're Getting Older model:** Many informants expressed awareness of the country's aging trend. These informants described news reports about an aging population, and often commented on the stresses this trend is placing on Social Security and other supports for older Americans.

**Informant:** *[There are] a lot of [older baby boomers] now because they live longer. I guess through accommodations and health care, they're able to just live longer and healthier for longer. More successful aging.*

**6. The We're Getting Younger model:** Other informants thought that the country's population was getting younger. Often this assertion was linked to the idea of a new baby boom (see above), as well as the sense that increasing numbers of people are having children at a younger age.

**Informant:** *I think because people do have families young, there's not as much separation between the generations. When you get people being parents at 20 and*

*grandparents at 40, there's not that much distance, especially if they've got families who've got sibling ranging in ages that bridge those gaps, too.*

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**Informant:** *Nowadays grandmothers are 30 years old. When I was coming up, grandma was always somebody in her 70s, 80s. Nowadays kids are raising kids. Child has a child at 15 ... mom is 30, grandmother's 45. Great-grandmother is 60.*

For some, the belief that the U.S. population is becoming younger was rooted in a strong and underlying conflation of media and technology trends with actual demography — in short, many informants thought that the country is getting younger in part because the world seems increasingly oriented towards, and built for, youth.

**Researcher:** *Do you think the country is getting older? Getting younger?*

**Informant:** *Younger. Definitely. Just turn on the TV. You don't see anything jumping up there to older minds. I see sports bras and teen deodorant. Spirit gum. Justin Bieber tickets. Stuff like that. They're really not speaking to an older audience.*

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**Informant:** *I think the country's getting younger. I think now when you look at business people you don't think, "Oh well, what's the son of Rockefeller doing or what's the son of whoever Ford doing?" You think, "Oh yeah, Mark Zuckerberg." You think about this young, new, hip, hybrid Prius-driving billionaire ... you don't think about the older generation when it comes to success. I think people model what the social level is for success based on what's young and what's new.*

## Implications

1. *The Compartmentalized Trends model undermines understanding of demographic change and prevents productive thinking about the need for an integrated policy approach.* The public's lack of an integrated model of demographic trends challenges thinking about how to constructively address the *effects* of demographic change. As long as the public views age and race/ethnicity as disconnected domains, they will have difficulty understanding, let alone supporting, an integrated policy approach. Overcoming this dominant model is a critical first task for those seeking to build public understanding of demographic change and support for the policies that these changes require.
2. *The Population Growth model coupled with an understanding of the economy as fixed is problematic in communicating about demographic change.* This suggests an underlying model of economic opportunity as a fixed and limited commodity that becomes scarcer as the population grows. It is clear that many members of the public need help realizing that population growth contributes to a growing economy and can increase opportunities for all members of our society.
3. *The Second Baby Boom and Getting Younger models run counter to actual demographic trends.* The public's view that the country's birthrate is increasing, that Americans are having children at younger ages, and that the population is getting

younger suggests that many Americans lack basic knowledge about these demographic indicators, and are therefore not attuned to the economic and social challenges that the country's falling birthrate and aging population portend. There is a danger that, without strategic reframing, communications about the need to direct public policy towards addressing these demographic changes will run aground on these assumptions, and struggle to find traction in the public mind. This challenge is compounded by the fact that media images strongly contribute to the perception of a youth-oriented culture.

4. *The We're Getting Older model provides a productive foundation for communications.* Although some members of the public lack basic knowledge about demographic trends, there is awareness of these trends among others. This awareness provides the requisite basis for communications about the challenges posed by these trends. The question is how to reach more people with these data and avoid the tendency of competing models to undermine this knowledge.
5. *The Latino Influx model narrows public understanding of demographic change.* The *Latino Influx* model is accurate in reflecting the substantial growth of the Hispanic population in the U.S. over the past several decades; however, its dominance obscures the role of other demographic trends. To prevent the public from falling back on the narrow default understanding that equates "demographic change" with "Latino influx," communicators must stress the full range of sources of demographic change.

## C. Models of Immigrants and the Country's Ethnic Profile

Immigration is seen as the dominant way that the ethnic and racial profile of the country is changing. Cultural models that people use to think about immigrants and immigration cluster into two groupings: "Us" models — those which characterize immigrants as people who in some way belong in our society — and "Them" models — those characterizing immigrants as foreign "others" who either don't fit or, worse, represent a threat to the "American way of life." It should be noted that this maintenance of multiple, often conflicting ways of understanding an issue is a common feature of human cognition.

### "Us" Models

**1. The Nation Of Immigrants Model:** Informants frequently drew upon an understanding of contemporary immigrants as part of a long trajectory of newcomers to the U.S. who have strengthened the country and made it what it is today. This model recognizes a shared set of ambitions and contributions among all immigrants, and connects being an immigrant with a sense of American identity.

**Informant:** We're supposed to welcome everyone. It shouldn't matter: the race, creed or color, sex, religion ... none of that should matter if you come to this country, because we are all like that. That's what we're supposed to be, a united nation of

immigrants. And I think that's why our country was set up. That's exactly what the United States is.

**2. The *Immigrants Are People Model*:** Informants repeatedly employed the assumption that immigrants are “people just like you and me,” and that all people deserve an equal chance at success and happiness. This model structures an understanding of immigrants as people who are trying to do the right thing but who face difficult choices and circumstances, and shapes the opinion that immigrants deserve to be treated as “one of us” and with dignity, respect and kindness.

**Researcher:** *What are the good things about immigrant groups growing?*

**Informant:** *I think the key to breaking down all those barriers is getting to know one person at a time. That's just been my own personal experience. You see the people as a whole block of people, but then you get to know one person. It breaks down a lot of the mental barriers between people. You start realizing hey, they're people too. They want to have families, raise kids, have a job and live the American way just like you do. I think that's — that's a good thing, because it breaks down us/them.*

**3. The *Value Of Diversity model*:** Informants shared an implicit understanding that immigrants increase the diversity of ideas, cultures, cuisines and skills in the country. According to this model, such diversity enriches the lives and experiences of all Americans. Informants focused specifically on how a variety of perspectives contributes to innovation and problem-solving, widens people's perspectives and creates new learning experiences.

**Informant:** *I think that variety is a spice of life. The people that come, they bring their culture, their food, their style, their music, their dance, their outlook, their opinions, and these could be good and bad. But it's the variety, the ability to pick and choose. To be able to go in almost any neighborhood in America and to go where the restaurants are and there's maybe 10, 15 different ethnic restaurants. I think that that is just something awesome that other cultures bring.*

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**Informant:** *I think [LA is] a wonderful place to live. I think it's really culturally diverse. I think if you're around too much of the same, some cases it like breeds ignorance. If you're never exposed to something, how do you learn to react to it? I think that's something to champion for.*

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**Informant:** *We probably would've had less intellectual, scientific and cultural growth without diversity. I think that the diversity has accelerated our world as a nation. We've come so much further in only 200 years than a lot of countries in Europe that were very homogenous, came in 600 or a thousand. I think that one of the things that cultural diversity does is force people to think fast, think on their feet, change their attitudes quickly, and it accelerates the process of, if not growth, then change.*

## “Them” Models

**1. The *Lawbreaker Model*:** For many Americans, “immigrant” invokes a default to “illegal immigrant” and with it a model of “lawbreaker.” When this model is active, there is a strong invocation of the notion that the “law is the law” and that people who break it are bad.

**Informant:** *My opinion is if you're not legal, you broke the law to get here, whether you did it yourself, or your parents did it. The kids I kind of feel sorry for, but I don't know, maybe I'm prejudiced against that. I just think people should follow the rules and not break the law to get here.*

**2. The *Immigrants As Takers Model*:** Informants also drew on an understanding of immigrants as individuals who lack a strong work ethic and have come to this country to avail themselves of “our” generous social services. This model, which was particularly powerful in structuring informants’ thinking about people who immigrate to the U.S. illegally, defines immigrants as lazy and unproductive people who are a burden rather than a boon to the country. As such, it is consistent with the *Population Growth* model’s assumption that perceived population increases are severely straining our limited resources.

**Informant:** *I feel like there's a loophole and I feel like these people who just don't want to work, they just want to keep having babies, like the Spanish community, they are all on food stamps, they keep having baby after baby after baby after baby because they know that the government is going to support them. That's what I think is crazy.*

**Informant:** *I don't feel like just coming here just because you want to live the free life is a good enough excuse ... I mean, I'm not racist by any means, I just feel like it's already bad enough over here, we don't need more people to take from the taxes. Like I said, they are living on welfare. Go back to your country. You are taking away from us now. Our tax dollars are paying for you to have 40,000 babies and live in a one-bedroom apartment and have all of your men working for you under the table so that you can still get benefits. It's unfair.*

**3. The *Foreigner Model*:** This is the most archetypal model of the “other” — that person whose basic differences are deemed discomfoting and even threatening. The model speaks to a visceral aversion to being among immigrants due to their different linguistic and cultural practices. Informants are especially sensitive to what they perceive to be immigrants’ disinclination to full assimilation in American society, which appears to constitute a rejection of what informants deem to be a responsibility to “become American.”

**Informant:** *Shit. A lot of people come in — Non-English speaking, you know? And they're just different. Culturally different, but different enough to where they're playing mariachi music really fucking loud, with their beats and everything going at like 10 o'clock at night. That drives me absolutely insane.*



**Informant:** *None of them speak English. I don't feel like that's right at all. If you are going to work here, then you should be speaking English. I mean this guy didn't know any English. He couldn't even say, "tomorrow" and you didn't even know what he was saying. My husband tried to talk to him and he's like, I don't even know what you are saying. I'm trying to talk to him and he doesn't know a lick of English.*

## Implications

1. *The Nation Of Immigrants and Immigrants Are People models provide a foundation for thinking of immigrants as an integral part of American society.* These models provide important bases for framing immigrants as part of the American experience and social contract. Future research should explore how best to invoke, or otherwise leverage, these models to create productive discussions of demographic change.
2. *The Value Of Diversity model sets up an "immigrant as resource" way of thinking that is dramatically different from the "immigrant as threat" understanding structured by the "them" models of immigrants.* When diversity is seen as an asset rather than a threat, a wide range of messages and policies becomes "thinkable." The notion that immigrants *bring* value, rather than take it, is a promising understanding for experts seeking to bring an assets-based perspective to communicating about the interdependencies that exist among different demographic groups. Future research should explore the best framing strategies for activating this model, and helping Americans apply it in reasoning about issues of demographic change.
3. *The Lawbreaker, Taker and Foreigner models represent a fundamental challenge to efforts to situate immigrant communities as part of the American social and economic fabric.* Each of these models casts immigrants as "others," who represent a strain or threat to our national welfare. These models make it very difficult for people to think about increases in the nation's immigrant populations as a potentially positive trend for the future of the country.
4. *Shifting strategies are key in messaging about immigration and immigrants.* The competition between "Us" and "Them" models suggests the importance of finding an evidence-based strategy to foreground models that situate immigrants as net contributors to the country's prosperity and as genuine members of American society, and background those that frame immigrants as threats and takers. FrameWorks' research on immigration has found that making moral arguments and appealing to the importance of pragmatic solutions are two effective ways of orchestrating this shift.<sup>2</sup>

## D. Models of Generations and Relationships Among Generations

Analysis revealed a range of models that informants used to think about generations and the relationships between generations.

**1. The *Family Lineage Model*:** Informants typically described generations as a lineage of forebears and offspring within the structure of an extended family unit. The model is vertically structured — each generation is defined by its linkages to the other generations within a family.

**Researcher:** *How would you describe a generation?*

**Informant:** *I'm a generation. My kids are the next generation. My grandmother was first-generation from Germany. My mother was second. I am third. My kids are fourth. So that, to me, is a generation.*

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**Informant:** *I'm first generation and if I have children, my children are the next generation, and my children of children, they're the next generation because here on earth, we die. You know, the certain amount of time we got, and then we have the next generation.*

A key finding of this research is that this *Family Lineage* model dominates thinking about intergenerational relationships — focusing attention at the family, rather than population, level. Using the *Family Lineage* model, informants expressed a strong sense of intergenerational responsibility within the family unit.

**Informant:** *I'm a believer that a lot of change starts in the home. And you have to have parents who are active and not forceful but are strong-handed and making sure that their children have proper discipline, whether that's like food or schoolwork or personal life. So I think it starts at a really small level and then it builds to a bigger level.*

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**Informant:** *For some people old age is really a struggle because you don't have anyone taking care of you. You're just trying to figure out anything. Others, they stick you in a home, I guess, that's okay. For us, it's different. Our grandmother has severe Alzheimer's, and she lives full-time with my mother. Because we are not the type who would just put somebody in a home.*

Although informants thought of intra-family relationships largely in terms of mutual support and cooperation, they also suggested that lineage generations were becoming less close — both because of decreased physical proximity (people move apart more often), and because of the strains of modern life, which give people less time to cultivate intergenerational relationships. There is, thus, a tension here, as elsewhere, between the ideal and the real. People assert a strong sense of intergenerational responsibility within the family as an ideal, but at the same time sense that, in reality, intergenerational bonds are fraying within the family.

**Informant:** *It seems that, back in the day, generations were closer. There was a closer relationship and it seems that families were more close-knit. We would go to grandma's house for Sunday dinner, or great-grandma's house for dinner. But as the generations progressed, there's less and less of that and it may be less and less of that because as the generations progressed, people started to move farther away from one*

*another, and so they were no longer at the close proximity to have that generational relationship ... that close-to-the-family relationship that they had in the past.*

**2. The Population Experience Model:** Informants also focused on shared experiences between populations of individuals in defining a generation. This model is horizontally structured — each generation’s character and role is defined by linkages with same-age social peers. According to this model, generations are age blocs defined by their exposure to major events and experience of cultural trends.

**Informant:** *A generation would be people born around the same period of time. What defines this idea of a generation is something going on. For example, there was a world war and people born just after that war were called the baby boomers. Because all of these men come back from being overseas for so long. They get married, start making babies. So that was the baby boomer generation. And that would be 1945 to maybe early '60s. And that would be one generation. And then you have the “love child” generation which would be the '60s when the Civil Rights Movement was going on. It's usually around the time of some sort of social significance.*

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**Informant:** *It's an age range of people who roughly make up your peer group. So within a certain age group, we refer to that as a generation, and that generational experience can be very different from one generation to the next. A generation is a group of people who are clustered in an age group roughly going through the same growth experiences at the same time.*

While a few informants thought of generations in terms of the traditionally accepted 20- or 25-year spread, for many informants, the idea that people born over a period of 20 years would all be considered members of a common generation was no longer a viable model of generational definition. Many informants suggested shorter time spans in defining generations: For example, several informants suggested that a 15-year-old today belongs to a different generation than a 25-year-old.

**Informant:** *I'd say decades. You from the '80s, you from the '90s, and you from early 2000s. Those are different generations.*

**3. The Aging Is Hard Model.** Informants shared the assumption that the experience of being of advanced age in the United States is often a difficult one, especially in social and economic terms. Younger and middle-aged informants were the most likely to invoke this model.

**Informant:** *Mentally I think older people get so lonely. I think if they're contributing members of society and they're lonely and miserable, it's not good for anybody.*

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**Informant:** *People are running out of money, unless you have a retirement like my mom's, where you have 85 percent of your salary for the rest of your life. A lot of people don't save that way. A lot of people didn't do it that way, so they're running out of money.*

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**Informant:** *Unfortunately, what they are about is trying to figure out how they're going to survive once they do retire. And people are working well into their late 60s and 70s, because it's money. It's all about money. Either you had a good 401k or you didn't, or Social Security is not enough to get you by. Even though my husband talks about, "Oh, I can't wait to retire at 65," I'm like, "Yeah right. You're not going to be able to."*

**4. The Legacy Model:** According to this model, older generations have a responsibility to younger ones — to manage resources responsibly, take care of the environment, share their wisdom and knowledge, and pass on the world in as good or better shape than they found it.

**Informant:** *However you describe a generation, I think it is important to help the next generation come along.*

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**Informant:** *I think the environment is one way that we have some responsibility to the generations that come after us. I think that we should be cognizant of the fact that there may well be generations that come after us and not destroy everything, not mess up everything. That we have a responsibility to give them an opportunity to make it.*

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**Informant:** *I think that we clearly say that the older generations have responsibilities to the younger generations. And I think we don't live up to it. I think we fail miserably in doing that. I think that our inherent greed as individual people, as a society, has made us much more willing to sacrifice the long-term futures of ourselves, our children, their children, for our own immediate gain. And gains that are, in my opinion, fairly meaningless. We can say that we want to leave the younger generation a cleaner, happier, more prosperous world, but if that means we can't get two new cars a year, no, forget that.*

As evidenced in these quotes, while this *Legacy* model is readily available to people as a way of thinking about intergenerational accountability, there is an accompanying sense that this model is often not realized in practice, as other motivations and priorities assert themselves. This tension between people's idealized models of intergenerational interdependence, and their sense that the real world actually works differently, is a central feature of the cultural and conceptual landscape of this domain.

**5. The Ideal-World *Interdependent Fates* model.** When thinking about generational relationships beyond the family level, Americans ascribe to an ideal model of interdependent fates. Asked whether what happens to one generation affects other generations, informants quickly asserted that, of course, generations affect one another. This model of interdependent fates was, however, thin — with little content, unhelpful in thinking causally or remedially, and quickly abandoned by more dominant senses of what is "real." The interdependence of generations was treated as the normative answer— what people think they are supposed to say, but, beyond meeting this social expectation, the

model did not appear to organize people's thinking about generational relationships in a meaningful or substantive way.

**6. The Real-World *Separate Fates* Model.** A very different set of assumptions, however, structure how people think the world *actually* works, and how the generations are, and are not, connected. While informants want to believe that the generations share common fates (and believe this is what they are supposed to say), the dominant underlying assumption is that they *in fact* do not. This assumption is partly structured by the strong set of four binary contrasts described below, which set up a way of thinking about the generations as inhabiting separate worlds of understanding, practice and disposition. These contrasting models are further strengthened by the assumption that older people are not, in reality, part of the lives of younger people outside of their family. This model provides a characterization of generational segregation wherein, outside of the family unit, old and young rarely interact and, as people move beyond the child-rearing years, they become disengaged from the lives of younger people.

**Researcher:** *Could you just lay out why more people don't participate in those kinds of activities that are geared toward younger people?*

**Informant:** *Well, I think unless you are a coach you tend to move away from that sort of thing. It's kind of like, "I did all of that when my kids were young and I've got other hobbies also, I have many, many things on my plate so you know, I wouldn't have time to do that anyway regardless. I don't have time to do Boy Scouts the way I used to do it." When you have children, you tend to migrate to what your children are doing. So when they are on the swim team, you help out on the swim team. When they are playing baseball, you help out playing baseball. I think it's just the way people do things.*

Generational segregation is sometimes naturalized through the assumption that people inevitably gravitate toward other people of the same age. Among younger informants, there was a sense that social interaction with older generations can be awkward and uncomfortable.

**Researcher:** *So, do you see young people and old people interacting a lot in the city?*

**Informant:** *I want to say no, unless it's just a casual speaking, and if it is, then I can tell that it's a relationship there, it's a mom and a daughter, or some type of familial aspect of it. But I don't think you see it ... I just think because people just gradually navigate toward your own clusters of age. And I guess if I choose between two people to speak with, and I saw one that's like 62 and the other one's 32, I'm going to probably naturally go over to the 32-year-old.*

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**Informant:** *Out at Walmart or the mall is where you would see a grandmother and her baby grandchild with the mom or something. You just see those people and you don't know who they are or if they are related or if they just know each other. You know, there's not a lot of times that you would see, like, random generations hanging out, you know, it's just weird.*

Despite their idealized models of shared generational fates, people lack a strong model for thinking about shared generational fates in the real world of experience. When informants were thinking practically, in concrete terms, about how generations affect one another, they typically treated the concerns and interests of different generations as distinct and unrelated.

**7. Open and Adaptable Youth vs. Closed and Rigid Elders:** Using this model, informants contrasted the open-mindedness of young people with the perceived close-mindedness of older adults. They emphasized young people's willingness to embrace change and innovation, racial/ethnic and sexual differences, geographic mobility, and the possibilities that come from living in a highly-networked and collaborative world. Part of this "openness" is rooted in necessity: According to this model, the world is changing fast and young people are aware that they must keep up in order to succeed. By contrast, informants cast older Americans as intolerant, closed-minded and conservative with respect not only to race and sexuality, but also to technological change and social mobility.

**Informant:** *I think a lot of things that previous generations were uptight about, like, "Oh my God, you're marrying somebody from another race" or, "You're gay" or, "You have a tattoo." Or who knows what. The current generation is like, "That's cool. Do your own thing. Express yourself. Love who you want to love. Why be uptight about that? That's not a big deal. That doesn't matter." So, I think those are changes for the good. I mean, I know plenty of soccer moms with tattoos.*

**Informant:** *I would say that older people are less tolerant and younger people are more tolerant. I think that socialization and social networking make a difference there, have helped make a difference there.*

**Informant:** *I think people are realizing that they don't have to live the same, exact duplicate lives that their parents did. I think that there's a lot less conformity and more individualism. Hopefully, that leads to creativity and solutions to the problems of the world. Some kid growing up today may have the solution to creating enough water and food for everybody, or who knows what.*

**8. Tech-Savvy and In-Tune Youth vs. Outdated and Extraneous Elders:** Informants agreed that digital technology is the key axis that separates older and younger generations. Across the age spectrum, informants defined young people by their reliance upon, and ability to use, digital technologies. Older Americans were characterized as less skilled, less comfortable, or otherwise deficient in the abilities necessary to function in an increasingly digital world. This model assumes that technological savvy affords young people tremendous advantages in networking, knowledge-generation, mobilization and informed consumption. As a result, young people are viewed in largely empowered terms — despite a challenging job market, there is a perfect fit between a fast-changing, digitally driven world and a generation that is open to change and has mastery of that digital platform.

**Informant:** *I think this generation is more tech savvy than past generations. My mom's now just starting to learn a computer. And my mom's 60. For her it was a little*

*bit harder. It was a little bit different, because she was never taught that and it was never around back in her time. Now, with these kids, 8-year-old kids can work iPads. It's like ... what the F?*

—

**Researcher:** *What comes to mind when you think about older generations?*

**Informant:** *I think older generations don't understand as much. I'll give an example. My grandmother, she's 65, asked me how to send a text message. Asked me how to check her voicemail. Asked me how to set up an email address. My mother, she doesn't know how to say, "Facebook."*

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**Informant:** *Like, with technology and everything, it's like, what do you have to ask a parent for? You can just go online and look it up your own self. You can learn everything on your own, so you really don't have to sit there and ask your parents about the birds and the bees, you can go Google and find out about the birds and the bees. And so, it seems like everything is advancing and everyone's growing up so quickly.*

**9. Elders Who Knew How to Play vs. Youth Addicted to Screens:** In contrast with the previous model's positive evaluation of youth's relationship with digital technologies, this model evaluates this same relationship negatively, viewing young people today as *too* dependent on digital technologies. According to this model, basic skills of communication and social engagement are faltering as a result of young people's reliance on digital technologies. These technologies are framed as unhealthy for body and mind, with informants frequently lamenting young people's declining reading, writing and math skills, their lack of patience, and the fact that they no longer "go outside and play." This model exists in tension with the *Tech Savvy* model, as Americans also recognize the practical value of mastery of the new skills and technologies that define the modern world and workplace.

**Informant:** *I am on social media and all that stuff, but I just think it takes away from your social skills. Say there's a certain age group, like in their 30s, so we're in the middle, or I'm in the middle where, "Okay I came from 'it wasn't here' to 'it is here.'" But the kids now, this is what they know. So I think it's harder to have that interaction because they're outside of school, that's it.*

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**Informant:** *When I was a kid I would go ride my bike and I would come home with a cut knee and it wouldn't be like that now. And I would take a bath and it would be like dirt. I don't think people do that anymore. Unless you're in an organized sport, I don't think people go play. If you go over to Jimmy's house and you play Call of Duty or you play Xbox, I think it's generating a socially retarded society.*

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**Informant:** *[Technology] is good in some ways, but you had all the video games that started in the 90s, and that's what they did. That's what caused the obesity crisis. Kids didn't get out. Back in my day, in the 70s, we left the house, got on our bikes, our Schwinn's, and we didn't come home until the street lights came on. We rode everywhere. We walked everywhere. That's not what it is today at all. These kids are impatient because of electronics.*

**10. Entitled and Lazy Youth vs. Wise and Responsible Elders:** Informants contrasted the perceived deficient moral qualities of youth<sup>3</sup> with the positive moral fiber of older generations. According to this model, young people are materialistic, spoiled by their parents, driven to a sense of entitlement, lacking in responsibility, and generally selfish, lazy and disrespectful. Notably, it was not only older informants that described younger generations as plagued by moral failings. Young informants often described their own generations in similar terms. By contrast, older people are viewed as responsible and disciplined, with sound values and a strong moral character.

**Researcher:** *How would you characterize the younger generation?*

**Informant:** *I think a lot of them are lazy, entitled.*

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**Informant:** *[Young people] just want everything right now! “I don’t know how I’m going to pay for it, I don’t know how I’m going to get it, but I want it!” And they are very selfish.*

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**Informant:** *I went to Catholic school my first eight years. I think we learned a lot from those nuns. We learned a lot of values and morals. I don’t really see that today. It’s like people’s moral compass is so off. I do, I think that today.*

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**Informant:** *I think respect is definitely a big thing that’s changed throughout our generation ... I mean, a lot of my age type people — early 20s, are rude as anything. I don’t feel like they have respect for anybody but themselves. I feel like before there was a lot more respect for people.*

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**Informant:** *There’s knowledge that our older folks have. The stories, the whatever. What they did, what they experienced. You can learn a lot from that.*

## Implications

1. *The Family Lineage model is potentially problematic.* People’s default to thinking about families when “thinking generationally” can narrow attention and create a substantial challenge when trying to communicate at the *population* and *public policy* level. This insular way of thinking renders the challenges facing both the youngest and oldest generations as private issues to be dealt with in the family, and undermines openness to collective solutions to these challenges. It also tends to blind people to differences in situations across families. This finding should direct communicators to rethink the utility of highly personalized narratives and exemplars.
2. *The Interdependent Fates model represents a tentative foothold for communicators.* This way of thinking is clearly in line with the expert perspective; however, it is important to emphasize the thinness of this model. The relative weakness of this model, compared, for example, to the *Family Lineage* model, suggests that, without significantly more content, people’s existing understandings of generational interdependence cannot provide the basis for meaningful engagement.



3. *The Separate Fates model poses a serious obstacle for communications about cross-generational relationships.* At one level, the model reflects an awareness of the simple fact that generations are becoming increasingly segregated and that, in particular, older generations are more isolated from the rest of society. At another level, however, the model indicates a deep failure of public understanding about the intersecting interests of different generations. Countering the deep assumption that the generations' fates are unrelated will be one of the major tasks of future communications work.
4. *Models of generational contrasts unproductively position people of different ages as separate and disconnected.* The oppositional structure of public thinking about young and old, and the negative models of both of these groups, further contribute to the difficulty in thinking about the *shared* fates of both young and old, and sap people's motivation to provide assistance across generational lines. Promoting a perspective that focuses attention on each generation's assets rather than on binary strengths and weaknesses will require strategies for deflecting this deeply rooted tendency toward oppositional thinking. This represents a key challenge to the project's overall goal of facilitating a broader vision of intergenerational collaboration that transcends ethnic divisions.
5. *Intergenerational Competition: A "Cognitive Hole."* The strength of this underlying *Separate Fates* model is evident in what is *missing* from people's talk about intergenerational relationships at the population level. There is little sense of intergenerational conflict or competition — that, for example, the welfare of today's older Americans could come at the expense of today's young and middle-aged Americans, or vice-versa. This was true despite an overall pessimism about the state of the economy, employment opportunities, and the future of the country. It also stands in contrast to informants' thinking about immigration, in which immigrants' effects on public resources was a salient concern. Informants simply did not adopt a resource perspective when thinking about generational relationships. This is linked to the low salience of policy in people's thinking about generations. Aside from occasional worries about whether or not Social Security will continue to exist in the future, informants rarely brought up resources or policy when discussing generational issues, and more rare were discussions of competition between generations over resources. On one hand, this "cognitive hole" means that communicators do not need to defuse conflict between groups, as might have been assumed. On the other hand, the public's lack of awareness of resource challenges suggests that, when communicators want to engage the public about these challenges, they must begin by bringing these challenges into public awareness. In general, the assumption that any scarcity would be an outcome of natural forces undermines interest in designing alternative approaches or implementing policy interventions.
6. *The public's understanding of generations in binary terms — young and old — obscures the characteristics, experience and relationships of middle-aged people.* To the extent that generational thinking at a population level is structured in largely binary terms — young and old — there is an absent middle. Informants certainly

know that there are middle-aged people; many of our informants were themselves middle-aged. But intergenerational dynamics — and some of the top-of-mind contrasts that impress people — are most evident, salient and tangible when thinking about the two ends of the adult age spectrum. This binary structure makes it hard for people to consider the distinct issues facing the so-called “sandwich generation,” people of middle age who are helping both their elderly parents and their not-yet-independent adult children. Communications will need to frame young and old as poles on a continuum, and bring that continuum clearly into view, in order to bring middle generations into the picture.

## E. Modeling Solutions to America’s Demographic Challenges

With few exceptions, informants struggled to articulate any concrete steps that could be taken to constructively address long-term patterns of demographic change in the U.S. Likewise, they struggled to talk about constructive steps that could be taken to advance greater generational collaboration and the models of respect, accountability and interdependence they idealized. Instead, it was clear that most informants assumed a certain inevitability to current trends, such that the question is less about what *can* or *should* be done, and more about what *will* happen given the social, economic, political and cultural direction of the nation. This fatalistic, or naturalistic, model, described in greater detail below, dominated people’s thinking about how to address demographic and generational change in America, while the remaining three models were less pronounced across informants’ talk.

**1. A Fatalism Model:** Underlying people’s talk about the future of the nation was a notion that current forces have taken on a life of their own and there is little to be done about them. The models described at the beginning of this report — *Dented American Dream*, *The Lost Village*, and *Modern Life is Unsafe* — structure a sense of fatalism about our collective ability to improve life for any of the generations. Looking to the future, informants expressed a substantial degree of pessimism about the experience of becoming older; the future viability of the Social Security benefit; and the ability of the young to govern, form and sustain relationships, and continue to manage society effectively.

**Informant:** *I don’t think that things are changing in a good way. My grandmother, she’s about to retire. And she’s trying to figure out what she’s going to do when she’s retired, because no one’s going to hire a 65-year-old woman compared to someone who’s 25. I’m 40 years younger than you and I can move faster. So I believe that jobs are going to be an issue. Money is going to become an issue for them. If you don’t have any money, what are you going to do? Stay home. You’re going to be home a lot. So, I think that it’s definitely changing for the worse. Things are definitely getting worse for the older generation.*

**Informant:** *I don’t know where we’re going. I don’t particularly like where it looks like we’re going. Maybe we need church organizations to instill in the people and*

*strengthen people that are weak and going down, uh ... because you just can't dictate moral things. It seems we've gone away from what's old fashioned — that we are just so free to do whatever we want to do, even to our demise.*

Informants had difficulty linking public policy considerations to the demographic changes taking place in the country — even when these changes were described to them. In short, these changes were not thought of in terms of public policy, and people did not look to public solutions as a viable means of addressing and managing these changes.<sup>4</sup> This inattention to public policy is likely driven both by the *Fatalism* model and by the American public's tendency to default to individual- and family-level, rather than systems-level, perspectives in thinking about problems and solutions.

**2. The *Community Locus* Model:** While the public lacks a strong model for thinking about generational collaboration, there was a notable trend towards talking about community-level institutions and locations as places where such relationships might be built. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this model and the two that follow were far less powerful in structuring public thinking than the dominant *Fatalism* model.

**Informant:** *There's not much to do in Berryville. We have a park and we do have music in the park in the summer in one of those gazebo things. So I think people have to mix, just walking down the street. There's a little coffee shop there in town, and there's a mix of people there. Older people come in and younger people come in and they seem to get along.*

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**Informant:** *There's a public park on Hazelton and Houston in Sherman Oaks and they have an aquatic center, and I'll go and swim there, and I've had the, like, most random conversations with, like, little old ladies who come and do their water aerobics and stuff. It's interesting!*

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**Informant:** *There's street-fests ... like, we just had Rib Fest a couple weeks ago ... and last weekend was the Square Roots Fest. I see a lot of older people coming out, but it's also harder coming for older people because it's a lot of walking. But I do see a mix of old people and younger people, and families.*

**3. The *Education is the Answer* Model.** When thinking at the population and societal level, informants frequently invoked education as a more familiar domain in thinking about making national-scale improvements for the future. Informants regularly discussed education as the key to improving life in a wide range of areas.

**Researcher:** *What are the most important things we've talked about today?*

**Informant:** *Education. Number one. Because if you educate on how the political system really works, you educate on how diversity brings something new, and how great it is for our economy. You educate how eating well will help you live longer and help you feel better. Educate on how going to college will give you a better life than getting a GED and getting a Starbucks job. I think that, as a whole, if we become a people who are more conscious, and push that, that could probably help.*

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**Informant:** *I think that if we're going to change as a society, we have to start with the kids, and it has to come from school.*

Informants linked education to economic prosperity, decreasing crime, greater acceptance of difference, and a range of other social goods. In a few instances, informants even suggested education as a way to foster interaction among groups:

**Researcher:** *Are there things we could do to create more generational mixing?*

**Informant:** *I think a lot of that has to do with school ... the more we educate them. "It's okay to be different and it's okay to mix yourself. It's okay to be ambiguous and talk to different races." If we teach that that's okay, the children and young people are going to learn. If we teach them that way, then if you grow up — it's kind of like a white person raised in a black neighborhood. They grow up thinking they're black, you know what I mean? Well, how different is that than anything else? If we introduced that into the education program and were saying, "Hey, it's okay," then we're going to grow up and we're just going to know that it's okay. It's going to already be programmed.*

**4. The Transportation Model:** Across the scope of our interviews, transportation emerged repeatedly as a topic of importance. Alongside good employment opportunities, it was invoked as a consistent marker of a city or town's quality of life, with attention to the convenience, diversity and efficiency of a place's transportation infrastructure. It also emerged consistently as a topic in discussions of older Americans' quality of life, often as a source of challenge for elders and an arena where municipalities can work to improve people's quality of life. Informants spent time talking about the transportation issues in their own cities, either lamenting difficulties with transportation or talking about the benefits of convenient transportation.

**Informant:** *I think there's neighborhoods that probably have more older people. I guess it depends on the neighborhood, because they need convenience. A lot of them don't drive. Unfortunately, I think older people, sometimes they don't live in certain neighborhoods because there's no store for miles, or whatever. I think that affects the neighborhoods, too, depending on what's in the area, unfortunately. But that's just how it is when you get older. I think you need to be around, you know?*

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**Informant:** *There are so many good things about the city that other cities don't have. We have the most fabulous bus system and El system and train system. There's no place you can't go in Chicago. The only other place that I have — a city that I have visited on a really systematic basis was San Diego. I mean, San Diego is one of the most beautiful places I've ever been to, but go ahead and try to get on a bus there ...*

## ***Implications***

1. *Fatalism about the ability of public policy (or anything, for that matter) to meaningfully address broad patterns of demographic change represents a fundamental challenge.* The assumption that societal decline is a natural process with debilitating effects that cannot be prevented or addressed greatly undermines agency. Insofar as the public cannot envision a meaningful and efficacious engagement — one they believe can make a positive difference for themselves, their families and the nation — they will remain disinclined to either engage or support meaningful policy initiatives. Future research, especially testing around the effects of values as means of reorienting people's perspectives, will be key in addressing this challenge.
2. *The public's weak solution models suggest some potential leverage points for communications.* The *Community Locus* model indicates the public's understanding of the role of community places as sites of intergenerational interaction. For the moment, the public thinks of these locations as “happenstance” sites for intergenerational interaction, places where generations cross paths and enjoy each other's company, but little more. This suggests that communication strategies might be developed to help the public build on this community-level thinking to understand how communities could be *intentionally designed and built* in ways that facilitate intergenerational contact and collaboration. The *Education is the Answer* and *Transportation* models suggest two important community-level institutions and infrastructures where such a communications strategy could be built.

## V. Mapping the Gaps and Overlaps in Understanding

The goals of this analysis have been to: (1) document the way experts talk about and explain demographic change in the U.S.; (2) establish the ways that the American public understand this same issue; and (3) compare and “map” these explanations and understandings to reveal the gaps and overlaps between the perspectives of these two groups. We now turn to this third task.

### Overlaps

There are important overlaps in how experts and the public understand the contours of demographic change in the U.S. today. These overlaps, which are detailed below, provide important starting points for communicating with members of the public about how to leverage these changes for the greater well-being of our society and all of its members.

- 1. Growing Diversity Enriches Cultural and Economic Life:** Both experts and members of the public share a recognition that the country is becoming more diverse, and both groups hold a positive model of that diversity as enriching the nation both culturally and economically. It is important to note, however, that for the public, this positive view of diversity exists alongside negative models of diversity as a cultural and economic threat.
- 2. The Country is Becoming More Tolerant:** Both experts and members of the public believe the country is becoming more tolerant, and that this trend represents a positive trajectory for the country.
- 3. Older People are Living Longer:** Both experts and the public recognize that older Americans are living longer lives now than in previous generations. However, whereas experts typically pivot from this recognition to discussion of the social and policy consequences of this change, members of the public exhibit little interest in, or awareness of, these broader implications.
- 4. All Generations are Facing Economic Challenges:** Experts and the public share a recognition that the modern American economy places significant strain on old and young Americans alike. Both groups point to the challenges that young Americans face when entering the job market and the difficulties that older Americans encounter as they face care, health and transportation costs on limited, and often fixed, incomes.
- 5. The Future of Social Security is Uncertain:** Both experts and the public are concerned about the future viability and stability of Social Security benefits. This overlap is only partial, though, as experts speak to the possibility for systemic reforms to boost the program’s strength, while the public is largely fatalistic about long-term sustainability.
- 6. Older Generations Have Both Assets and Responsibilities:** Experts and members of the public agree that older Americans have something valuable to offer younger generations — skills, knowledge and wisdom. Both also believe that older Americans have a responsibility to leave a positive legacy for future generations.

7. **Older and Younger Generations Typically Lead Separate Lives:** Both experts and the public recognize that older Americans' daily lives are often segregated from broader public life, and from the lives of children and youth in particular. Both deem this generational segregation regrettable, though the public has more difficulty recognizing its real collective costs.
8. **Community is the Locus of Interaction:** Both experts and the public identify community-based opportunities for intergenerational collaboration as key. For the public, local institutions such as libraries, parks and public festivities are arenas for meaningful intergenerational encounters. In a similar, but more systemic, vein, experts point to the need to support and design public institutions and spaces for intergenerational experiences and relationships.

In addition to these largely productive overlaps, analysis revealed a set of *gaps* between the ways that experts and the American public think about the demographic and generational makeup of the country. Below, we describe each of these gaps and discuss their communications implications.

## Gaps

1. **Demographic Trends: Integrated vs. Compartmentalized.** One of the most significant gaps between experts and the public is that experts think about demographic changes along ethnic *and* generational lines, while members of the public think about these changes in isolation. Experts are highly attuned to the intersection of changes in the country's generational and ethnic profiles, and to the implications of that intersection for the country, yet the public's compartmentalized perspective leaves these intersections unrecognized.
2. **Ethnic Diversity: Benefit vs. Threat.** While experts view ethnic diversity primarily in positive terms, the public is much more ambivalent about the effects of diversity and, in particular, of immigration. The public views immigrants as both an economic and a cultural threat. These strong negative models of immigration exist alongside, and threaten to undermine, the public's more positive perceptions of diversity.
3. **Unit of Analysis: Population vs. Family.** Experts easily consider questions of generational change, responsibility and interdependence at the population level, while the public's strong default is to think about these topics at the individual family level. The public's difficulty in moving beyond the family context thwarts consideration of societal responses to generational challenges.
4. **Fates of Different Generations: Linked vs. Separate.** While both experts and the public share a recognition that older Americans too often live in segregation from the broader society, they differ in how they understand the effects of that separation. For experts, elderly segregation brings with it a cost to society deriving from the unrealized potential of older Americans to contribute to the success of other generations, and society more generally. For the public, while generational segregation is perhaps unfortunate, its impacts are largely located within individuals and families, on the assumption that, at the societal level, generations' fates are not closely linked. In short,

the public lacks a robust model of population-level generational interdependence.

5. **Age Structure of the Country: Getting Older vs. Getting Younger.** While experts note that the country is currently aging overall, in large part due to the so-called “baby boom” generation now reaching elderly status, the public is split on their level of knowledge about this trend, with the default guess for those unfamiliar with the trends being that the nation is getting younger.
6. **Age: Life-Course Perspective vs. Binary Structure.** Experts talk about the full spectrum of ages represented in the American population, and adopt a life-course perspective in talking about the interdependence that runs across that spectrum. The public, meanwhile, is much more likely to focus attention on either end of the spectrum, to talk about youth or older Americans and their various characteristics and contrasts. The middle years of life are largely absent or backgrounded in generational talk and thinking. In short, experts are accustomed to thinking about age as a continuum, while the public defaults to age as a dichotomy.
7. **Orientation: Forward vs. Backward.** While experts are focused on the macro-scale policy changes necessary to move the country forward and best leverage our changing demographics, public thinking is subject to a strong nostalgia that looks back to a “lost village” and wishes for a return to the simpler times of the past.
8. **Allocation of Resources Across Generations: Critical Policy Question vs. Invisible Consideration.** Experts recognize that demographic trends in the U.S. represent a challenge for public resources, with an aging baby boomer generation with substantial health care and income security needs living alongside a smaller working-age population. Experts argue that we can expand opportunities and create a prosperous society that advances the interests of all generations, but that this will require smart, focused policy. The public, meanwhile, is not attuned to these resource challenges or their generational features. The public worries about a generalized decline in economic security and opportunity in the country, yet adopts a fatalistic attitude about what can be done about it and — lacking a practical, problem-solving orientation on this front — does not consider these issues as concrete challenges about the allocation of resources.
9. **Relationships Among Generations: Assets or Contrasts.** Experts have an “asset” model that recognizes differences across the generations but considers all generations to have things to contribute. The public’s default models are focused on the positives and negatives of each generation, identifying the strength of one (e.g., youthful open-mindedness) in terms of its negative contrast (e.g., older people’s closed-mindedness). This dichotomous thinking sets the public up to diminish the contributions that members of any given generation offer society.
10. **Demographic Change: Policy Challenge vs. Simple Fact.** Experts are attuned to the need for, and the ability of public policy to respond to and shape, ethnic and intergenerational relationships and impacts in both the short and long terms. For experts, smart policy can optimize the effects of our country’s changing demographics, while the lack of an intentional and strategic policy approach may result in a more fragmented and less prosperous country. With the exception of immigration, the public does not see our nation’s changing demographics as a policy arena, but assumes that



ethnic and generational dynamics largely play themselves out as a matter of course. Large-scale demographic forces are seen as too large to be productively addressed, and, instead, there is a sense of naturalism — what will be, will be.

## VI. Conclusion

This report has highlighted some of the challenges involved in engaging the public in productive conversation about demographic change and intergenerational interdependence. Multiple prospective communications tasks emerge from this research and analysis, requiring the identification and testing of discrete frame elements. Among the central challenges are the following:

- To develop communications strategies and tools that can help the public recognize the *integrated* nature of demographic change in the U.S. today. This is a task where *explanatory metaphor* research holds promise in identifying a way to break through the public's cognitive compartmentalization and focus attention on the linked patterns of ethnic and generational change
- To identify and refine strategies for linking generational fates, to help people recognize that the welfare of today's and tomorrow's older Americans is fundamentally intertwined with that of today's youth, and vice-versa. *Values* are likely to do important work here, though an *explanatory metaphor* might also provide a way of linking up generational trajectories as part of a common national trajectory. Both values and metaphors might help people see the *human lifespan* as one that requires supports throughout, to help people move away from compartmentalized thinking about the presumably distinct needs of children, students, the elderly, etc.
- To identify tools — most likely *values* and causal chains — that can move people move beyond fatalism to a recognition that demographic change is an arena where collective solutions can result in meaningful changes. The demographic changes currently transforming the United States are thought of as large, immovable forces that are beyond the scope of efforts to change them. There is an assumed inevitability to these changes, and public policy is not looked to as an arena of action and efficacy.

Meeting these challenges will require addressing the strength of the family focus in people's thinking about generations and intergenerational relationships and responsibilities. It will also require identifying ways to help people move beyond their binary contrast models (young vs. old) to consider the middle years of life, the full spectrum of ages and assets, and fuller set of ways in which generations are interdependent and collectively shape national outcomes.

Moving forward, future research should include the following steps:

1. **Test existing communications practices.** Current framing practices in the advocacy and scholarly fields should be empirically tested against other potential reframing strategies to determine which ones achieve their intended outcomes — or whether they work in counterproductive ways.

2. **Test existing Frameworks tools to explore their efficacy relative to the challenges identified above.** These include explanatory metaphors and values that have elsewhere proven productive in building public support for social policies across a range of issue areas.
3. **Develop new reframing tools to address problematic and absent models in the public's thinking.** In cases where past framing tools are unable to address the specific challenges identified here, new reframing tools should be developed to keep the public from falling back on the dominant and problematic narratives about demographic change that keep this issue from moving forward.
4. **Test how to best integrate discussions of intergenerational interdependence into other issue domains.** Demographic and generational change derives much of its importance from the ways in which these changes interact with social and economic policy across a wide range of issues, including immigration, education, race, poverty and human services.
5. **Organize reframing tools into an integrated story.** This would provide communicators with a fully elaborated narrative about demographic and generational change that can be used to strategically address the questions the public is likely to ask. This communications strategy derives its power both from constituent tools, including *values* and *explanatory metaphors*, and the way those tools are embedded in a more comprehensive narrative structure. With this shared narrative in hand, advocates and experts can pivot from common messages about demographic change and intergenerational interdependence to more specific messages about how these changes intersect with early childhood development, education, human services, immigration and the other closely linked social issues.

## About The FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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<sup>1</sup> See Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> Baran, M., Kendall-Taylor, N., Lindland, E., O'Neil, M., & Haydon, A. (2014). *More of them means less for us: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of immigration and immigration reform*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>3</sup> For more on how Americans think of youth, see: <http://frameworksinstitute.org/adolescence.html>

<sup>4</sup> The one exception to this lack of policy-level thinking was regarding immigration policy, where many informants expressed an awareness that immigration policy was currently being negotiated. For most informants, that policy debate boiled down to a concern with strengthening the nation's border and deciding what to do with those currently in-country without documentation. Other features of the system and policy were poorly understood by most.