

The National Health and Aging Trends Study: A new resource for studying disability and independence in older people

Background

As the population of Americans age 65 and older increases over the next several decades, there is a greater need for research to address as we prepare for the changes in demographics as well as technological and medical advances. Because Americans are living longer, older adults will have an increasingly prominent and hopefully active role in society. Meeting the needs of the aging population becomes increasingly important to planners, policy experts, and businesses.

As the featured guest lecturer for the USF Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging, Dr. Judith Kasper of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health addressed a group of researchers on February 3, 2014. Her presentation “The National Health and Aging Trends Study: A new resource for studying disability and independence in older people” highlighted a new database available to study aging. The National Health and Aging Trends Study (NHATS) is funded by the National Institute on Aging (part of the National Institutes of Health) and was designed by an interdisciplinary research team. As principal investigator of the study, Dr. Kasper described the details of the study and its potential impact to increase our understanding of aging in the United States.

Purpose

In order to address the needs of a changing demographic, NHATS is designed to promote a

comprehensive understanding of the trends and dynamics of the aging population. The information will be used by future researchers to reduce disability, maximize functioning, and enhance quality of life of older Americans. The study incorporates the scientific community through a variety of study mechanisms, with the intention of promoting further research on disability and older adults.

Method

Beginning in 2011, the study was designed as a longitudinal analysis of Medicare recipients age 65 and older with annual in-person interviews that document changes from the initial survey information. The first round of interviews began in 2011, with follow-up interviews conducted in 2013 and additional interviews scheduled for the coming year. Participants answer questions and complete both physical and cognitive tests to assess their capacity to perform activities. Consequently, the data capture a wide range of abilities from high performance through adaptation to impairments.

NHATS expands on previous research because it measures a wide range of new activities that older adults may pursue and allows for the separation of environmental accommodations from the capacity to perform activities. The study promotes further recognition of the consequences of disability not only on individuals, but on their families and society as well.

Beginning in Round 2, for those who passed away between interviews, there are a series of questions about care the participant received during the last month of life. Family, friends, or caregivers of the deceased person are asked questions about the quality of life, functioning, place of death, and level of care of the participant during the last month of life. These interviews are expected to increase our understanding about end-of-life care and the experiences of older people and their caregivers during the last month of life.

In addition, interviews of up to six informal helpers of the participants complement the data gathered from older people. The additional dataset, the National Study of Caregiving (NSOC), is a supplement to the NHATS and is linked to the participants' information, including diseases, disability, and stated needs. This study aims to explore the role of family and friends who provide help to the participants with daily activities.

Information gathered from the study will allow for a better understanding of the effects of disability on aging Americans and insight on how to improve late-life functioning and overall well-being for older adults.

More Information

Details on the study can be found at:
<http://www.nhats.org>.

Information on the National Study of Caregiving (NSOC) can be found by visiting:
<https://www.nhats.org/scripts/participant/NSOCOviewerview.htm>.



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