In the fifty-plus years since the onset of the baby boom in 1946, government agencies and other sources have generated a remarkable amount of data about the 76 million people who make up this generation. Actually, the vast majority of this information has been collected for other purposes—such as the census, vital statistics on births and deaths, estimates of unemployment and labor force participation, and so on. Still, the sheer volume of available data makes it possible to track the experiences of the baby boom generation in many different ways.

Given the brief length of this article, there is no hope of presenting a summary of all that is already known about the members of the baby boom. Instead, this article will consider the broad question, What kinds of things can we learn about the aging of the baby boom through available data? The article is thus organized around four basic themes that can be readily investigated:

1. What were the origins of the baby boom generation?
2. How will the U.S. population change with the aging of the baby boom?
3. How does the baby boom compare to other generations?
4. What are important differences within the baby boom generation?

**ORIGINS OF THE BABY BOOM**

Figure 1 gives a historical summary of both the total number of births (upper, gray area) and fertility rates (lower, heavy line) in the United States during the twentieth century. The baby boom is immediately apparent as a bulge in both the number of births and the rate at which women 15–44 were giving birth. In both cases, the magnitude of this growth is also heightened by comparison with the 1930–1945 period, when first the Depression and then World War II kept births down.

There is a simple relationship between the two types of data in Figure 1: The number of births in a given year is equal to the fertility rate for that year multiplied by the number of women aged 15–44. To understand why it is important to pay attention to both the number of births and fertility rates, consider what has happened since 1946. Marking the beginning of the baby boom to 1946 is quite easy, from a demographic perspective, since the sharp rise in both the number of births and the fertility rate in 1946 is unprecedented. The question of when to date
the end of the baby boom is less clear, but the U.S. Bureau of the Census assigns 1964 as an ending date, since this is when fertility rates returned to their pre–World War II levels. Note, however, that the number of births has never dropped to anything like its pre-war levels.

Although the period from approximately 1965 to 1980 is often referred to as the “baby bust,” Figure 1 shows that the number of births was, historically speaking, quite high—just nowhere near the level during the baby boom. By comparison, the fertility rate from 1975 onward has been lower than at any other point in this century, including the Depression. Yet, despite this continuing low level of fertility, the number of births has been on the rise since 1980. This is the so-called baby boom “echo,” where the relatively high number of births is due to the large number of women of the baby boom cohorts, even if they are having relatively small families.

This idea of boom, bust, and echo is familiar enough to have become the title of a popular book describing the equivalent demographic pattern in Canada (Foot and Stoffman, 1996). This pattern focuses almost exclusively on the number of births, yet changes in fertility rates are also important, since they are directly linked to family size. Periods of continued high fertility, such as for the parents of the baby boom, correspond to relatively large families, while extended periods of low fertility, such as for the baby boom cohorts, correspond to smaller families. The section of this article comparing the baby boom generation to their parents will return to this theme of fertility and family size. First, however, it is important to examine the long-term impacts of the births that are shown in Figure 1.

**Changes in the U.S. Population**

One of the best ways to understand how the U.S. population will change with the aging of the baby boom is to examine the place of this generation within the broad age distribution. Figure 2 shows age distributions for the United States at various points in time. Historically, the distributions shown in Figure 2 have been known as “population pyramids.” Yet only the earliest of this set of age distributions, for 1900, shows anything like a pyramidal shape. As the diagram for 1900 illustrates, the traditional shape
of age distributions reflected the impact of mortality across the lifespan, as the original size of any birth cohort was continually reduced at each subsequent age. This distribution created a pyramid, with the largest cohorts in the youngest age groups and progressively fewer people surviving into each subsequent age group.

More recently, mortality has been largely confined to the oldest age groups for nearly all sectors of the U.S. population. In the 1990 age distribution, the size of age groups under 70 is influenced much more by fertility (i.e., the original people born into each age cohort) than by mortality. The baby boom thus stands out as a considerable bulge in the current age distribution. For gerontologists and service providers, the key question is what happens when this bulge moves into the older age categories, and the answer is shown in the final two age distributions in Figure 2. The figures for 2030 and 2050 are obviously projections, and as such they depend on assumptions about both the birthrates that produce younger cohorts and the mortality rates that reduce older cohorts. Even so, the disproportionate size of the baby boom cohorts is unlikely to be altered by alternate assumptions.

The last three age pyramids in Figure 2 also show the effects of the “baby bust” and the “baby boom echo.” These correspond to the dip in size for the cohorts immediately after the baby boom and the subsequent return to cohorts that are nearly as large as the baby boom itself. The data for 2030 are particularly revealing in this regard, since they depict the disparity between the large number of people at retirement age (the baby boom) and the smaller number of people in their prime earning years (the baby bust).

Figure 3 provides a sharper illustration of the impact of the aging of the baby boom by concentrating solely on the older age groups (these data are thus identical to the top sections of the last three age distributions in Figure 2). These older age groups do exhibit the traditional pyramid shape, since the number of people in each subsequent cohort is largely a function of mortality. What is most notable in this set of pyramids is the tremendous growth in the number of older Americans because of the aging of the baby boom. Between 1990 and 2030, the majority of the baby boom will enter the “young old” age groups from 60–75, and these age groups will be nearly twice as large in 2030 as now.

The third age pyramid in Figure 3 provides estimates for the final stages of the aging of the baby boom, when the youngest members of this generation constitute the “oldest old.” Comparing the two oldest age groups to their pre–baby boom counterparts in the 2030 age distributions indicates that number of the oldest old will also, eventually, double in size because of the aging of the baby boom. One especially noteworthy feature of this final age distribution is the “violation” of the pyramid shape for women over 90 years old. Thus, for women in particular, the baby boom thus stands out as a significant bulge in the current age distribution. For gerontologists and service providers, the key question is what happens when this bulge moves into the older age categories, and the answer is shown in the final two age distributions in Figure 2. The figures for 2030 and 2050 are obviously projections, and as such they depend on assumptions about both the birthrates that produce younger cohorts and the mortality rates that reduce older cohorts. Even so, the disproportionate size of the baby boom cohorts is unlikely to be altered by alternate assumptions.
The Baby Boom will continue to make its presence felt well into the middle of the next century.

**The Baby Boom Compared to Other Generations**

So far, this discussion has concentrated on data related to the size of the baby boom cohorts. In terms of absolute numbers, this generation is virtually guaranteed to have a major impact on the nature of aging and old age in the United States. As several of the articles in this issue point out, this impact will be further magnified if this generation is distinctively different from its predecessors. Because many of the decisions that matter later in life are made at younger ages (e.g., getting an education, having children), demographic data are already available to examine many questions about how distinctive the members of the baby boom will be when compared to other generations.

Figure 4 examines fertility, since this behavior is so thoroughly entwined with the very nature of the baby boom itself. In particular, Figure 4 compares the ages when women had their baby boom children and the ages of those whose children were born 1916–1935. This older generation is of interest for two reasons. First, they are themselves the parents of the baby boom, so they supply a direct intergenerational comparison. Second, they represent those who are currently aged 60–80, so they are the next group of people who will need caregiving services.

The most striking feature of Figure 4 is the much higher birthrate, overall, for the older generation. Further, those women not only had more children but they had them at younger ages than women in the baby boom cohorts. The elevated number of births in the older generation at ages 20–29 is precisely the baby boom itself. So, depending on how one looks at it, the disparity in birthrates between the two generations may be due to either the unusually high fertility of the parent generation or the relatively low fertility of their offspring. In any case, it is clear that the older generation not only had more children but had their families at younger ages.

One reason that the difference in the number of children of these two groups is important is its link to family-based caregiving. For...
the older generation, having more children translates into having more potential caregivers. As the baby boom cohorts reach old age, however, they will have fewer children to rely on.

The age at which women in these two generations had children makes a difference, especially with regard to the so-called sandwich generation phenomenon. A woman who gives birth in her twenties will have adult children who are aged 50–60 when she herself reaches 80, so the younger generation will be past most of their child rearing responsibilities at the point that their parents’ frailty increases. That was the pattern for the generation that is currently entering old age. Women in the baby boom, however, had a larger proportion of their children in their 30s, so as the baby boom cohorts reach 80, more of their children will be in the 40–50 age range. If the youngest generation follows the pattern of the baby boom and delays its fertility, that will create the potential for a sandwich generation, where the adult children of the baby boom are more likely to have both parent-care and childcare responsibilities.

**DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE BABY BOOM GENERATION**

In our attempts to characterize the baby boom cohorts, it is just as important to pay attention to differences within generations as differences between generations. As Markides and Black (1995: 153) note, “There is little doubt that the fastest growing field within social gerontology in the foreseeable future is likely to focus on the heterogeneity of the aged population.” Figure 5 compares ethnic diversity for the current elderly population and for projections of the same age group in 2050. This bar graph indicates the number of people aged 65 and over for each ethnic group at the two points in time. As demonstrated earlier, there will be an overall growth in the older population, which is matched by growth in each of the major racial and ethnic categories in Figure 5. What is important to note, however, is that different racial and ethnic groups will be growing at different rates.

One basic message from Figure 5 is that growth in the elderly population will be most dramatic for the Hispanic and Asian populations. While the number of whites over age 65 will double between 1990 and 2050 and the number of older blacks will triple, the number of older Hispanics and Asians will increase by factors of more than five. In other words, although the aging of the baby boom will produce historically high numbers of older people for all ethnic groups, it will generate especially dramatic increases in the number of older Asians and Hispanics. This suggests that the aging of the baby boom may well have different impacts in those communities.

The fact that the white population is the slowest growing segment of the over-65 population also means that other ethnic groups will make up a larger share of the older population in the future.
future. It is thus particularly important that we not confuse the experiences of the white, European-American majority of the baby boom with the experiences of this generation as a whole.

**CONCLUSIONS**

As noted at the outset of this article, this presentation has been illustrative rather than exhaustive. These conclusions will thus consider the additional kinds of facts and figures that we could investigate through available data. Among the four basic themes in this chapter, the major opportunity for additional work is in the last two, which demonstrate intergenerational differences (Figure 4) and heterogeneity within the baby boom (Figure 5). These conclusions thus echo those of the introduction to this issue, urging that we pay attention to differences both between and within generations.

Emphasizing substantive comparisons between and within generations does not diplay either the historical demography represented by Figure 1 or the projections of age distributions in Figures 2 and 3. Understanding the fundamental aspects of fertility and mortality will always be a central task for demographers. The rest of us, however, are far more likely to pursue substantive questions that arise from the aging of the baby boom—rather than the actual aging of the population itself.

With regard to intergenerational differences, Figure 4 illustrated fertility differences between baby boomers and their parents, and there obviously are many other possible comparisons. Just about any data series that covers the past few decades can be adapted to compare these two generations. Examples include, but are certainly not limited to the following: workforce experience, educational attainment, marriage and divorce, disability, and receipt of public assistance. Nor is there any need to limit our intergenerational comparisons to the older generation, since the aging of generation X already allows equivalent comparisons for events that characterize early adulthood.

With regard to differences within the baby boom generation, although race and ethnicity are the most prominent aspects of diversity in our society, they are hardly the only factors that create heterogeneity within the baby boom. As noted in the introduction to this issue, other important differentiating factors include gender and social class as well as the need to distinguish between those born earlier or later in the baby boom. We also need to recognize that these various sources of heterogeneity do not operate in isolation, since we often need to consider the intersection of age, gender, race, and class. Fortunately, nearly all large data sets include this basic information.

We can thus use existing data both to compare the baby boom to other generations and to locate the most meaningful differences within this generation. In some cases, these need not be separate tasks. For example, consider Figure 4, which showed the birthrates of all women in the baby boom and in their mother’s generation. Do those aggregate rates apply equally to African, Asian, European, and Hispanic Americans? If there are differences in fertility associated with racial and ethnic groups, to what extent is that due to different levels of education among those groups? Alternatively, we could investigate whether the pattern in Figure 4 holds equally for women born in the first versus the second half of the baby boom: Did women born from 1946 to 1955 have fertility patterns that were more similar to those of their mothers than to those of women born from 1956 to 1964? And so on.

It seems safe to conclude that the possibilities are endless. A wealth of available data allows us to investigate any number of questions about the nature of the baby boom itself, as well as the degree to which it differs from the cohorts that came before and after. There is a certain synergy here, since the very “information age” that baby boomers have both lived through and created is itself the source of so much data about this generation. From our point of view as students of aging, the richness of the available facts and figures about recent generations is a valuable resource indeed.

**REFERENCES**
