

# A Generation's Journey: The Aging of Orange County





## A Tale of Two Counties

Older adults today are more visible, active and independent than any generation before.

From grandmas taking up paddle boarding to titans dominating business headlines, today's older adults are living longer, are in better shape and are embracing life with gusto, not a gold retirement watch.



Photo by David Zentz

These are the seniors we see. The ones who fit the model of the Orange County dream.

But beyond the charisma of Orange County's youth-oriented culture lies a hidden population of older adults we don't often see: hungry, homeless, neglected and living precariously without a safety net. They might be your neighbor, the checker at your local grocery store or a friendly face at your place of worship.

Or you might never meet them at all. There are 28,000 seniors residing in long-term care facilities across Orange County. Shockingly, nearly half of them do not have a single friend or family member actively involved in their care, according to the Council on Aging – Orange County. We suspect this is just the tip of the iceberg, with many more seniors in need hidden among our community, struggling to manage alone.

This special report is intended to bring this invisible population into focus and spark the difficult conversations we must have about the aging of our community. Yes, it's about dignity for the generations that created Orange County's past. But it's also about our future.

Orange County's population is aging faster than the national average. Over the next 35 years, the proportion of our population age 65 and older will more than double, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 2050, one in four Orange County residents will be age 65+, compared to one in five nationally. What's more, the segment of our population age 85 and older will more than triple as a percentage of our population by 2060, significantly outpacing the national average.

## RAISE OUR VOICES FOR THE SILENCED

*"In Orange County, as people age, their voices become quieter and quieter. As a community, we are not hearing them."*

— Lisa Wright Jenkins  
President & Chief Executive Officer  
Council on Aging – Orange County

# The Aging of Orange County

Although only 13 percent of the U.S. population is 65 or older today, the United States Census Bureau projects the number of seniors will more than double by 2060. And locally, that growth will affect us sooner, with the proportion of older adults in Orange County increasing by more than 65 percent over the next 15 years, according to the 2013 Orange County Health Profile.

As our population continues to age, a new set of needs will emerge more noticeably in Orange County. And the truth is that we are not prepared. The anticipated financial strain of this increase on our health and social services will challenge the capacity of health care providers, caregivers and community organizations. As a result, seniors may be in peril when they need us most, and an unprepared community may push our economy to the brink.

Given this rapidly growing demographic, never before has Orange County faced a crisis that cuts across such a large swath of our community.

The Orange County dream could become a distant memory, unless we take action now. We must tackle three key countywide issues — **housing and poverty**, **food security and hunger**, and **mental health** — to give the aging Orange County population the quality of life they deserve or face the possibility that our best years as a county are behind us.



The gap between cost of living for seniors vs. their income or savings is becoming wider in Orange County.

## Housing & Poverty

**69%**

OF PEOPLE RECEIVING RENTAL ASSISTANCE ARE ELDERLY AND DISABLED

*OC Housing Authority*



Some vulnerable older adults must decide between filling a vital prescription or buying food.

## Food Security & Hunger

**1 million**

MEALS ON WHEELS SERVED ANNUALLY TO OC OLDER ADULTS

*Orange County Office on Aging*



Older adults with dementia can be isolated, face safety issues, and lack access to social activities and health care.

## Mental Health

**61,000**

ADULTS WITH ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AT IMMEDIATE RISK IN ORANGE COUNTY

*Orange County Office on Aging*



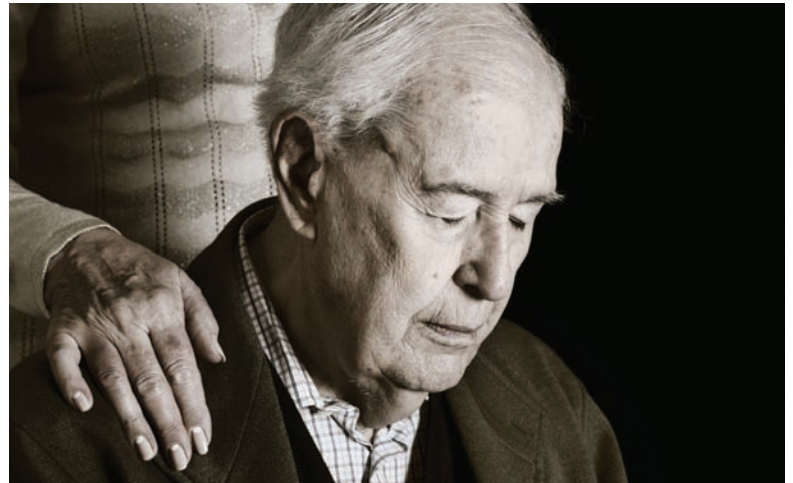
## The High Price of Loneliness

“Alone but not lonely” is a familiar phrase conveying the power of independence. And for many of the one in three seniors who live alone in Orange County, this statement expresses the range of choices afforded to a healthy and vibrant generation of older adults.

However, for older adults who are vulnerable to poverty, hunger or failing health, living alone can open up a world of unwelcome possibilities.

First, dwindling, meaningful exchanges can lead to isolation and depression. Like all of us, older adults fare much better when connected to friends, family and activities. This, however, can be a formidable challenge in Orange County, when children and grandchildren often flee the area due to the high cost of housing. Nearly 82,000 seniors age 65 and over live alone in Orange County, according to the 2012 American Community Survey. Vulnerable older adults can become isolated easily, placing them at risk on a number of fronts, including health issues, fraud and abuse.

“Suicide is a problem among the older population,” warned Lisa Wright Jenkins of the Council on Aging – Orange County. “Without people to help seniors adapt as their lives change, they don’t feel like they have a way out.”



Second, one in five seniors barely scrapes by at the poverty line, according to the California Poverty Measure. Although Orange County leads the United States on many fronts, this is an example where leadership is needed in our community. It should alarm us all that Orange County’s poverty rate among older adults is four times that of the national average.

Third, the Orange County disparity continues in housing. Seventy-nine percent of older adults own homes here, yet 69 percent of the adults who receive rental assistance from the OC Housing Authority are seniors and disabled. Within the distance that one of our county’s star athletes could throw a baseball, one senior lives in a million-dollar home, while another goes to bed every night wondering if he or she will have money for food or next month’s rent.

## WHEN THE DREAM BECOMES A NIGHTMARE

When 75-year-old Alice and her daughter — who also served as her caregiver — moved to Orange County, they expected to find opportunity and easy living. Instead, they found homelessness and hunger. Alice’s Social Security was barely enough to cover the cost of her medications, and the pair lived in their broken-down car, with an occasional stay in a rundown motel. Alice grew thin and frail after living this way over a period of years. Thankfully, Mercy House found them permanent shelter.

Food, however, continued to be scarce for the two women.

“I remember one week, my daughter and I lived entirely on bread and water,” Alice recalled.

A woman from a local church visited Alice and her daughter and helped them enroll in Meals on Wheels. Today, Alice has regained her strength, and neither worry when they will eat again.

Learn more: [mercyhouse.net](http://mercyhouse.net) 



## SOLUTION SNAPSHOT

The Council on Aging – Orange County in Santa Ana operates the **Friendly Visitor Program**, which is designed to help frail and lonely seniors remain in their homes and prevent the physical and mental health risks associated with social isolation. Trained volunteers visit seniors to check in on them and take them out of the house for activities. These visits are especially important because a friendly visitor may be the only person who calls or visits with them regularly.

**Learn more: Contact the Friendly Visitor office at 714-352-8820** 



## Buy Food or Fill an Essential Prescription?

The Great Recession brought many changes to Orange County. Although economists point to growing recovery, a heartbreakingly large number of aging adults in Orange County will tell you a different story.

“Many seniors are being forced to make the decision between buying food, paying rent, filling their prescriptions or paying for transportation,” SeniorServ’s Holly Hagler said. “Very often, seniors are under economic stress, and they are making decisions about which basics to cut.”

Like a roll of the die, they are forced to choose whether to buy food or pick up medication prescribed to combat the leading causes of death in Orange County among those older than 65, including heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

The Orange County Office on Aging, citing a UCLA Health Policy study, reports that a staggering number of seniors age 65+ are economically insecure, with nearly half of those living alone and more than 20 percent of couples facing poverty. And the result? Many go hungry or do what they thought they’d never have to do after a lifetime of work: turn to nonprofits for assistance with an empty stomach and a demoralized spirit.



To understand the enormity of this problem, consider that SeniorServ provides nutrition and supportive services to more than 15,000 older adults in Orange County every year. Ninety percent of these clients have incomes that fall below the senior poverty line. This plays out every day in Orange County, one of the top 100 wealthiest counties in the United States. And the number of impoverished seniors will only increase as our population continues to age.

For those without access to transportation or unable to leave their residences, the issues of food security and hunger are even more dire. Elderly nutrition programs delivered nearly 1 million meals to our community’s homebound seniors in the 2012-2013 fiscal year.

Food insecurity and hunger among aging adults has health consequences too. The American Society for Nutritional Science found that food-insecure seniors were at significantly greater risk for nutritional deficiency than their food-secure peers.

## WOULD YOU LET YOUR MOTHER LIVE LIKE THIS?

Eighty-seven years old and living alone, one Meals on Wheels client called upon the service for food — likely her sole meal of the day. The assigned Meals on Wheels coordinator met the senior at her home. The coordinator was thunderstruck by what she witnessed.

Filth, clutter and disorganization greeted her at the door.

She felt compelled to help beyond delivering the meal. The coordinator asked the homebound woman respectfully if she needed assistance cleaning her home. The woman said yes and admitted she had not been able to clean her home in years. Not only was her home an eyesore, it had become a safety and health hazard.

Age Well Senior Services, which runs the Meals on Wheels program that assisted the octogenarian, contacted a cleaning service to unclutter, clean and sanitize the home thoroughly. Now this senior can remain in her home safely.

Learn more: [agewellseniorservices.org](http://agewellseniorservices.org)



SeniorServ



## SOLUTION SNAPSHOT

Through Meals on Wheels, **Anaheim's SeniorServ** provides meals to approximately 900 aging adults a day. The results are transformational, with a 34 percent reduction in hospitalization among clients. Case managers also monitor seniors' mental health, contributing to a 20 percent improvement in depression. SeniorServ's program is a lifeline to our most frail homebound seniors.

**Learn more: [seniorserv.org](https://seniorserv.org)** 



Alzheimer's Family Services Center

## THE NEW GOLDEN YEARS REQUIRE ASSISTANCE

Tall, shoulders slightly stooped and steadied by a walker, Paul visited the Council on Aging – Orange County in July 2010 to inquire about assistance for his wife, Helen. Afflicted with dementia, Helen lived with Paul in Santa Ana, and the couple got by on Social Security and Medicare. Their only family was each other.

Helen's dementia was progressing. She tossed out Paul's brand-new hearing aid, walked aimlessly and lost her cognitive abilities. Soon, as the demands of caring for his wife increased, Paul's health began to deteriorate, too.

Yet the couple faced a dilemma: If Paul placed Helen in a skilled nursing facility, they would lose Social Security benefits and not have enough to live on. The process impeded both their care. With the Council's help, in January 2011, Helen was finally placed in a nursing home, where she lived until she passed away in December 2012.

A Council on Aging friendly visitor continues to check in on Paul monthly. After languishing on a lengthy wait list, he now receives low-cost, in-home meals. As the couple had feared, Paul lost Helen's benefits. Fortunately, the Council stepped up to connect him to resources that are helping to bridge his income gap.

## Who Will Remember Me?

In the time it will take you to read this page, another person will be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in this country. More than 15 million Americans are currently battling the sixth-leading cause of death in America. According to the Alzheimer's Association, Orange County Chapter, 84,000 aging adults with Alzheimer's and related dementias reside in Orange County. Right here in our backyard.

Our cognitively impaired older adults deserve access to the best health care Orange County has to offer, yet "access to services is a challenge because the county is so large, and older adults often lack transportation," explained Joanna Richardson-Jones, chief executive officer, Alzheimer's Family Services Center. "There is no solid public transportation system. Even if people are mobile, the county is so large that the long durations of time spent in the car transporting a person with dementia makes traveling to services very difficult."

This is a vexing disease across the country, but here in Orange County, it's seizing our aging population — and future — with urgency. Alzheimer's robs families of loved ones, taking away the identities and independence of those affected. And caregivers often are "sandwiched" between raising children while caring for aging parents.

But it doesn't stop there. The financial toll casts a heavy burden on families, communities and, yes, Orange County. In 2014, the disease will cost the nation \$214 billion. This number is expected to rise to \$1.2 trillion by 2050, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

For our invisible aging adults, there also are masked costs to Alzheimer's. In 2013, 15.5 million family and friends provided 17.7 billion hours of unpaid care valued at \$220.2 billion dollars, the Association reports.

Learn more: [alz.org/oc](http://alz.org/oc) 

In 2010, Orange County experienced 34.2 Alzheimer's-related deaths per 100,000 people in Orange County. That's higher than the California and United States averages of 29 and 25.1 per 100,000 individuals, respectively.

*2013 OC Health Profile*





Alzheimer's Family Services Center



## SOLUTION SNAPSHOT

Helping families have the highest possible quality of life is the first priority of **Alzheimer's Family Services Center**. Located in Huntington Beach, the center operates a day service, which offers people with the earliest to most-advanced stages of dementia a full day of stimulating therapeutic activities. Services are tailored to each participant's cognitive and physical abilities, and are available in Spanish and Vietnamese as well as English.

Learn more: [afscenter.org](https://www.afscenter.org) 



## The Ultimate Injustice

She attended every one of her daughter's ballet recitals. He taught his son how to tie his first bow tie before the prom. The loving hearts with which this couple raised their children couldn't imagine that their own offspring would fill them with fear one day and condemn them to the growing ranks of elder abuse victims.

Yet elder abuse and neglect is happening every day, a distressing trend reflected by the fact that reports of elder abuse in Orange County have increased nearly 60 percent from 2003 to 2013, according to Orange County Adult Protective Services (APS). Those with dementia are at even greater risk, with nearly half experiencing some form of elder mistreatment, according to a recent study by the UC Irvine Center of Excellence on Elder Abuse and Neglect. In addition, the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) reports that nearly one in 10 of those over age 65 in California experiences abuse. Yet that figure might be even steeper in reality, as the NCEA estimates that only one in 14 cases of elder abuse ever comes to the attention of authorities. And here in Orange County, residents age 85 and older are nearly six times as likely to suffer from abuse as those ages 65-69, according to APS.

It's another invisible injustice that Orange County's older adults endure.



Elder abuse doesn't stop at sharp words or abusive hands. The National Adult Protective Services Association found that one in 20 older adults experienced recent financial mistreatment — nine times out of 10 by family members or trusted loved ones.

"Elder abuse is emerging as a huge problem; financial abuse is particularly problematic for seniors as it often goes unreported," said Dr. Marilyn Ditty, chief executive officer, Age Well Senior Services.

**Learn more: [agewellseniorservices.org](http://agewellseniorservices.org)** ➔

**Learn more: To learn about elder abuse prevention or assistance, visit [agelessalliance.org](http://agelessalliance.org)** ➔

*"Senior services do not draw as much attention as children's services, and many people question whether the investment is worth it. We need to re-evaluate how we treat our elders."*

— Holly Hagler  
President & Chief Executive Officer  
SeniorServ



Source: Council on Aging – Orange County; coaac.org

**You can protect yourself or a loved one from being victimized by or exposed to financial fraud. Here's how:**

1. Visit [annualcreditreport.com](http://annualcreditreport.com).
2. Visit [dmachoice.org](http://dmachoice.org) or mail a request to DMA Mail Preference Service, P.O. Box 643, Carmel, NY 10512.
3. Visit [Facebook.com/privacy](https://www.facebook.com/privacy).
4. Sign up at <https://www.ims-dm.com/cgi/ddnc.php>.
5. Call 888-5-OPT-OUT or visit [optoutprescreen.com](http://optoutprescreen.com).
6. Visit [dmachoice.org](http://dmachoice.org) and click "Email Opt Out Service."
7. Call 888-382-1222 from the phone you wish to register. Or visit [donotcall.gov](http://donotcall.gov).

## The Issues Are Connected. And So Are We.

Whether you are 26 or 86, we all have something in common: the aging of Orange County affects our physical health, financial status and opportunity to access a more vibrant, prosperous Orange County.

We've taken the first step toward a solution: We've acknowledged that Orange County is changing. We are aging. We need new social services and structures to meet the demands that our burgeoning older adult population presents.

Health-care providers, caregivers and community organizations can't do it alone. **We need you. Start here and join us.**

**LEARN** about key issues older adults are facing and real-life solutions at [ConnectOC.org/olderadults](http://ConnectOC.org/olderadults).

**FIND** organizations assisting older adults on the ConnectOC Nonprofit Central database at [OCNonprofitCentral.org](http://OCNonprofitCentral.org).

**SHARE** your own stories and ideas at [Facebook.com/OCCCommunityFdn](https://www.facebook.com/OCCCommunityFdn).

**ACT** on your passion for our community today. Call OCCF at **949-553-4202** to learn how you can make a difference.



For a list of sources cited in this report, please visit [oc-cf.org/olderadultsources](http://oc-cf.org/olderadultsources).

**ConnectOC.org** shares local knowledge vital to the county's well-being and suggests strategies and opportunities to make life better for all of us who call Orange County home.

We thank the following organizations for providing images for this report:

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SeniorServ



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