

China and The United States: The Effect of At-Home Versus Institutional Elder Care on Quality of Life

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As of 2022, over 770 million people are over the age of sixty-five globally ¹. While the term elderly is dependent on culture, the United States government broadly considers anyone over the age of 65 to be elderly. It is important to note that the age people are considered elderly in China is 60; however, the World Health Organization classifies the elderly as people over 65 and most data gathered on a global level will reflect that classification ^{2 3}. Globally, that number is expected to double in the next twenty-five years ⁴.

With this expanding elderly population more people than ever are considering their elderly care options. Over the last hundred years, an eldercare industry has exploded into a billion-dollar industry in the United States alone ⁵. Many families in The United States are now having to make a complicated decision between paying exorbitant rates for often lackluster care or taking on the incredible burden of caring for an elderly family member. ⁶

At-home care can be a risky endeavor. Most family members are not experienced enough to accommodate the needs of the people they are trying to care

¹ Visual Capitalist. "Charted: The World's Aging Population 1950 to 2100." Visual Capitalist, www.visualcapitalist.com/cp/charted-the-worlds-aging-population-1950-to-2100/#google_vignette. Accessed 1/11/24

²National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. "Elder Abuse and Its Prevention." National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK235450/#:~:text=Traditionally%2C%20the%20E2%80%9Celderly%E2%80%9D%20are,persons%20age%2065%20and%20older. Accessed 1/12/24.

³ Pinsker, Joe. "When Does Someone Become 'Old'?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 28 Jan. 2020, www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/01/old-people-older-elderly-middle-age/605590/.

⁴National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK235450/#:~:text=Traditionally%2C%20the%20E2%80%9Celderly%E2%80%9D%20are,persons%20age%2065%20and%20older. Accessed 1/9/24.

⁵ Meola, Andrew. "US Aging Population Problems & Healthcare Issues." *Insider Intelligence*, 1 Jan. 2023, www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/aging-population-healthcare/.

⁶ "Senior Care Is Crushinglly Expensive. Boomers Aren't Ready." *The Washington Post*, www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/03/18/senior-care-costs-too-high/. Accessed 16 Jan. 2024.

for. On top of that, care can be incredibly draining as you watch a person that you care about deteriorate. Institutional care is often, if not always incredibly expensive. Finding a facility that has enough staff to provide care can be difficult and abuse in elder care facilities is rampant. While both methods of care present their benefits and challenges, neither is inherently better than the other. China is experiencing a shift towards more institutionalized elder care versus at-home care similar to what the United States experienced seventy years ago. This shift will lead to improved conditions for the elderly in China as long as the family is involved in care.

The United States History of Elder Care

A couple hundred years ago, at-home care was the norm ⁷. This meant that people with large families that had the economic means to support them had a relatively high standard of living. However, most people were kept in dependent poverty with few living relatives or relatives without the economic means to take care of them and were left with few resources ⁸. End-of-life savings were rare so even people with families who were able to provide for them were incredibly dependent upon their good will. This created an eldercare system in which people were either independently wealthy, reliant upon their children, or condemned to poverty. This began to change in the early nineteen hundreds when the Social Security Act of 1935 ushered in a new era of elderly

⁷“How’d We Get Here? The History of Nursing Homes.” *Next Avenue*, Next Avenue, 16 Mar. 2021, www.nextavenue.org/history-of-nursing-homes/.

⁸“Poor House (1794-1928).” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/prwi/learn/historyculture/poor-house.htm#:~:text=In%20some%20areas%20of%20the,not%20live%20at%20the%20poorhouse. Accessed 16 Jan. 2024.

care in the United States⁹. This act assisted the elderly through the Old Age Assistance program. Nursing homes or 'rest homes' as they were called sprang up nationwide¹⁰. While they had existed before they were almost entirely run by wealthy philanthropists or religious institutions who gave room and board to the 'worthy poor' mostly widows or people who had been active in the community for a long time¹¹. With this act, more people than ever were able to afford institutional care. This was especially important for people who had no substantial connection with their relatives or who had no relatives at all. While this act allowed more people to receive care, it also highlighted a growing problem in these facilities, elder abuse.

While elder abuse had always been present in care, never before had its effects been so widespread. The most common problems found in these facilities were fire hazards, improper diet, and other safety risks. In the 1950s government regulations were imposed to regulate the quality of care provided at these facilities. In 1954, the Hill-Burton amendments were passed which allowed public funding to build nursing homes instead of just hospitals¹². This change marks the shift from homey facilities that were meant to be intertwined with the community into a heavily medicalized facility that was incredibly sterile. When Medicare was rolled out in 1965 more people than ever

⁹"Different Care Settings at the End of Life." *National Institute on Aging*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.nia.nih.gov/health/different-care-settings-end-life. Accessed 7 Nov. 2023.

¹⁰ "How'd We Get Here? The History of Nursing Homes."

¹¹ "How'd We Get Here? The History of Nursing Homes."

¹²"Hill-Burton Act." *Hill-Burton Act | Perspectives Of Change*, perspectivesofchange.hms.harvard.edu/node/23#:~:text=On%20August%2013%2C%201946%2C%20the,needed%20and%20would%20be%20sustainable. Accessed 16 Jan. 2024.

before were able to access these institutions. Currently, elderly people who are cared for at home experience a better quality of life. Interestingly, patients cared for in institutional settings with consistent visits from family members experience a similar quality of life¹³.

China's History of Elder Care

China is now experiencing a similar shift in elder care. For hundreds of years, the elderly population has been dependent on their offspring for care. Similarly to the United States before the early twentieth century, care provided by offspring can range from exceptionally good and personalized to neglectful. Historically, care was provided by the son and his family (mainly the daughter-in-law)¹⁴. Because of family planning, the one-child policy, and other economic factors, elderly people are now experiencing a situation where they have fewer children who can provide care¹⁵. This is forcing them to either rely on institutional care or a daughter and her family. The rate of depression in older family members who are cared for by daughters is higher than any other group of people. This points to a possible link between happiness levels and cultural expectations of care. The care provided by daughters is not substantially worse than the care provided by sons and yet there is a clear disparity in emotional well-being between

¹³ "A More Humane Model for Eldercare in the U.S." *Harvard Business Review*, 15 June 2023, hbr.org/2023/06/a-more-humane-model-for-eldercare-in-the-u-s.

¹⁴Zhang, Yanan & Harper. "The Impact of Son or Daughter Care on Chinese Older Adults'." *Social Science & Medicine*, Elsevier, 1 Jan. 1970, ideas.repec.org/a/eee/socmed/v306y2022ics0277953622004105.html.

¹⁵Zhang, Yanan & Harper. "The Impact of Son or Daughter Care on Chinese Older Adults." *Social Science & Medicine*, Elsevier, 1 Jan. 1970, ideas.repec.org/a/eee/socmed/v306y2022ics0277953622004105.html.

elderly people who are helped by the culturally normal caretaker. The next likely shift in elder care is a shift towards a care industry ¹⁶.

The Negative Aspects of At-Home Care

The mental health of elderly patients is vastly improved by connection to family. People who are cared for by their families generally experience lower rates of depression and a higher quality of life. Unfortunately having to take care of aging family members puts a huge burden on the caretakers who are predominantly women ¹⁷. This burden placed on women is connected to the larger issue of women being expected to contribute more towards household care. While expecting women to be at home and able to care for aging family members might have made sense when fewer women were a part of the workforce, now, as more women enter the workforce, that expectation becomes more unreasonable¹⁸. Many at-home caregivers express exasperation with their elderly family members because of the intense pressure they face. Caretakers have a higher rate of depression and are often unable to access mental health support due to cost and time¹⁹.

¹⁶“Hill-Burton Act.” Hill-Burton Act | Perspectives Of Change, perspectivesofchange.hms.harvard.edu/node/23#:~:text=On%20August%2013%2C%201946%2C%20the%20needed%20and%20would%20be%20sustainable. Accessed 16 Jan. 2024.

¹⁷Sauer, Emma. “The Gender Gap in Caregiving and Why Women Carry It - UMKC Women’s Center.” *UMKC Women’s Center - Advancing Gender Equity*, 2 Mar. 2022, info.umkc.edu/womenc/2022/03/09/the-gender-gap-in-caregiving-and-why-women-carry-it/#:~:text=A%20caregiver%20can%20be%20someone,time%20giving%20care%20than%20males.

¹⁸ Mace, Nancy L. *The 36-Hour Day: a Family Guide to Caring for Persons with Alzheimer's Disease, Related Dementing Illnesses, and Memory Loss in Later Life*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981.

¹⁹[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9817300/#:~:text=In%20most%20of%20the%20cases,1.74%3B%20p%20%3C%200.05\).https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9817300/#:~:text=In%20most%20of%20the%20cases,1.74%3B%20p%20%3C%200.05\)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9817300/#:~:text=In%20most%20of%20the%20cases,1.74%3B%20p%20%3C%200.05).https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9817300/#:~:text=In%20most%20of%20the%20cases,1.74%3B%20p%20%3C%200.05).

At-home elder care is under-regulated in the United States, and because people who are experiencing mental decline might be unable to report it, abuse is hard to track.²⁰ The most common form of elder abuse is neglect, followed by emotional and financial abuse²¹. While abuse is more common in institutional care settings it is still present in at-home care²². Without institutional care facilities available, childless elderly people are left without any options. This is becoming a larger problem in places like China as populations decide to have fewer children while simultaneously lacking a system of institutional care.

The Positive Aspects of At-Home Care

At-home care has two major upsides, it's better for the mental health of the elderly person, and it's significantly less expensive²³. Elderly people who are cared for by family members experience lower rates of depression and a higher standard of living. This is likely because they feel that the people caring for them are more invested and they have consistent exposure to the people that they love. The cost of institutional care is incredibly high and many people are unable to pay for it because of this, at-home care might be the only option²⁴.

The Negative Aspects of Institutional Care

²⁰Dave Altamari, Jenna Carlesso. "The CT Home Care Industry Is Growing. Oversight Is Lacking." CT Mirror, 6 Apr. 2023, ctmirror.org/2023/04/02/ct-home-care-program-for-elders-regulation/.

²¹Beltz & Beltz. "7 Most Common Types of Elder Abuse (And What to Do)." Beltz & Beltz, 19 Oct. 2020, beltzandbeltz.com/7-most-common-types-of-elder-abuse-and-what-to-do/.

²² Beltz & Beltz.

²³ A More Humane Model for Eldercare in the U.S.

²⁴ Abelson, Reed, and Jordan Rau. "Facing Financial Ruin as Costs Soar for Elder Care."

Institutional care is the choice of over one million Americans and more than seven million Chinese^{25 26}. While institutional care is easier on the family, it can be difficult for the people who have to live in it. Elderly people who are cared for in institutional care settings experience higher rates of depression and a lower quality of life²⁷. Institutional care comprises a lot of things from end-of-life and palliative care to nursing homes.

Institutional abuse is rampant, with 81% of American nursing home residents having seen or experienced psychological abuse and just over 20% having seen or witnessed physical abuse²⁸. Despite this alarmingly high rate of abuse, care facilities experience little oversight or investigation.

As mentioned before, institutional care is incredibly expensive. Costs an average of 8,000 dollars per month in the United States (10% of the median household income) and 500 dollars per month in China (11% of the median household income)^{29 30}. This shuts out lower-income people from being able to access care and limits their options.

The Positive Aspects of Institutional Care

²⁵ Priya Chidambaram and Alice Burns. Published: Aug 14, 2023. "How Many People Use Medicaid Long-Term Services and Supports and How Much Does Medicaid Spend on Those People?" *KFF*, 14 Dec. 2023, [www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/how-many-people-use-medicaid-long-term-services-and-supports-and-how-much-does-medicaid-spend-on-those-people/#:~:text=Key%20takeaways%20include%3A,4%25\)%20\(Figure%201\).](https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/how-many-people-use-medicaid-long-term-services-and-supports-and-how-much-does-medicaid-spend-on-those-people/#:~:text=Key%20takeaways%20include%3A,4%25)%20(Figure%201).)

²⁶ C. Textor, and Jul 25. "China: Elderly Nursing Homes 2021." *Statista*, 25 July 2023, www.statista.com/statistics/251872/number-of-social-welfare-institutions-for-elderly-in-china/.

²⁷ A More Humane Model for Eldercare in the U.S.

²⁸ "Elder Abuse in Residential Long-Term Care Settings: What Is Known And ..." National Institute of Health, 2020, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK98786/.

²⁹ Abelson, Reed, and Jordan Rau. "Facing Financial Ruin as Costs Soar for Elder Care." *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 14 Nov. 2023, www.nytimes.com/2023/11/14/health/long-term-care-facilities-costs.html.

³⁰ Abelson, Reed, and Jordan Rau. "Facing Financial Ruin as Costs Soar for Elder Care."

The major positive aspect of institutional care is that it places the burden off of family members and on to trained professionals. In cases where an elderly person's condition might be outside the capabilities of family members, it might be best to rely on outside sources. Many elderly people develop mental health issues, and 32% of elderly people over the age of 85 have developed Alzheimer's Dementia, something that can best be cared for by a professional ³¹. Institutional care can allow family members to live separate lives.

Conclusion

Institutional care is generally better for everyone involved in care provided that the family is still involved. The shift that China is experiencing in terms of the type of care will be good for the general population. Regardless of the benefits or disadvantages of institutional or at-home care, it seems clear that the mental health of elderly people is significantly improved by regular contact with their family and friends ³². Unfortunately, many seniors have few or no visitors, it is estimated that 60% of nursing home residents have no visitors something that badly affects mental health³³. While at-home care might seem like the solution, many family members are not able to provide that level of care. Furthermore, that type of care puts extreme pressure on

³¹Balaban, R B. "A Physician's Guide to Talking about End-of-Life Care." *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Mar. 2000, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1495357/.

³² Balaban, R B. "A Physician's Guide to Talking about End-of-Life Care." *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Mar. 2000, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1495357/.

³³ Underwood, Tom. "Forgotten Seniors Need Time." *Ajc*, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 6 Oct. 2010, www.ajc.com/news/opinion/forgotten-seniors-need-time-care/s6mdH3uUuYzZRcApmVYmvL/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20National%20Center,percent%20have%20no%20living%20children.&text=An%20estimated%2060%20percent%20of%20nursing%20home%20residents%20never%20have%20visitors.

family members, often women. Whatever the solution to this crisis is, it seems like it must include a decrease in the cost of institutional care and an increase in familial involvement when they are in homes.