

## **U.S. must plan for longer lives**

Yanyi K. Djamba

*Montgomery Advertiser*

September 5, 2013

Seniors live everywhere in Alabama. However, there are large variations across counties. In 2012, the following counties had the highest percentages of people 65 and older: Lamar (19.7 percent), Choctaw (19.6 percent), Cherokee (19.3 percent), Henry, Marion, and Conecuh (19.2 percent). The lowest values were found in Lee (9.7 percent), Tuscaloosa (11.1 percent), Shelby (11.8 percent), Russell (12.3 percent), Montgomery (12.4 percent) and Madison (12.9 percent).

Regardless of the part of the state they live in, people now live longer than ever before. According to the *2013 Alabama Population Data Sheet* released by the Center for Demographic Research on July 11, the life expectancy ranges from 69.8 years in Wilcox County to 79 years in Shelby County. The state average is 75.7 years.

Despite the apparent positive profile, Alabama seniors face some challenges. In terms of seniors' health, Alabama ranks 44 in the nation, just above Kentucky (45), Arkansas (46), West Virginia (47), Louisiana (48), Oklahoma (49) and Mississippi (50). Minnesota is the healthiest state for seniors in the nation, according to the 2013 Senior Report by the United Health Foundation.

The same source shows that the top three health issues Alabama seniors face are: high prevalence of physical inactivity, low prevalence of able-bodied seniors and high premature death rate. Physical inactivity for seniors is widespread in Alabama with an estimated 36.9 percent or more than 240,000 seniors classified as inactive.

Interestingly, physical inactivity is associated with seniors' educational attainment. In Alabama, 50.7 percent of seniors with less than a high school degree are physically inactive compared to 22.5 percent of seniors with a college degree. Since the new cohorts of seniors have higher education than the previous generations, the rate of physical activity of the older population is expected to rise as more baby boomers reach age 65.

Here are some encouraging statistics. Alabama seniors have low prevalence of chronic drinking (1.9 percent) and the percentage of Alabama seniors who received recommended hospital care is relatively high (98.4 percent). Also, compared to other states, Alabama has a high percentage of creditable drug coverage for seniors (88.4 percent), and ranks 5 in the nation alongside California, Ohio, and Nebraska. The top ranked states for creditable drug coverage are Minnesota (89.6 percent), Iowa (89.3 percent), and North Dakota and South Dakota (88.6 percent).

One key remaining issue is living arrangements. Who cares for the elderly? According to the 2010 Census, over half (55.1 percent) of non-institutionalized persons 65 and older lived with their spouse. Only 29.3 percent lived alone. Because women live longer than men on average, older women are more likely to live alone than their male counterparts.

The increase in life expectancy is a great thing for all. However, unless individuals themselves and the society plan well for the soaring aging population in our communities, older age can turn

into a time of despair for many seniors.

*Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and professor of sociology at Auburn Montgomery. The center's website is <http://www.demographics.aum.edu>*