

# Farewell, Boomers

by Frank O'Hara

I moved to Maine in 1975. I was one of the in-migrants the distinguished University of Maine sociologist Louis Ploch (1988: 14) described as “voluntary, largely noneconomically motivated persons with positive attitudes toward their new communities.” We were part of the baby boom generation, those born between 1946 and 1964. We boomers—both those born in Maine, and those who moved here—have had a profound effect on Maine’s landscape, culture, and politics. Now we are leaving the scene. What has been our effect, and what comes next?

The simplest way to display our impact is through population pyramids, which show the population by age (bottom to top) and by sex (left and right) in a given year. They are called “pyramids” because, when they were first conceived, there were more babies than children, more children than young adults, and more young adults than elders. Hence the pyramid shape. We baby boomers created a huge bulge in the pyramid.

Some compare the boomers moving through the age pyramid to a python swallowing a pig. My own analogy is the drawing on the first page of the children’s book *Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. It showed what looked from the outside like a crumpled hat, but when the inside was revealed, turned out to be an elephant inside of a boa constrictor. The boomers are the pig and

the elephant. Figure 1 shows Maine age pyramids from 1970, 1990, and 2026, based on ones created by State Economist Amanda Rector. It’s not hard to spot the baby boom generation as it ages.

The pyramids show the numbers. But what do the numbers mean on the ground, in real life?

In the 1960s, rising boomer enrollments flooded the public school system, stimulating a flurry of construction. Today, two in five of Maine’s public elementary and high schools—236 in all—were built between 1950 and 1970 (see Figure 2) (Johnson et al. 2025). The building wave was next experienced in post-secondary schools—the University of Maine System, the Maine Community College System, and private colleges.

In the 1970s, boomers poured into the labor market (see Figure 3) (McInerney 2021). Businesses could not absorb all of the new workers, so the government created the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). CETA paid the salaries of entry level workers in public agencies or nonprofit organizations, and these employers, in turn, provided training. I happened to have worked with a number of CETA workers at that time, and many went on to successful and well-paying careers in the private sector.<sup>1</sup>

Violent crime in the United States is primarily committed by young men between the ages of 18 and 24. Predictably, as boomers

FIGURE 1: Age Pyramids for Maine, 1970, 1990, and 2026

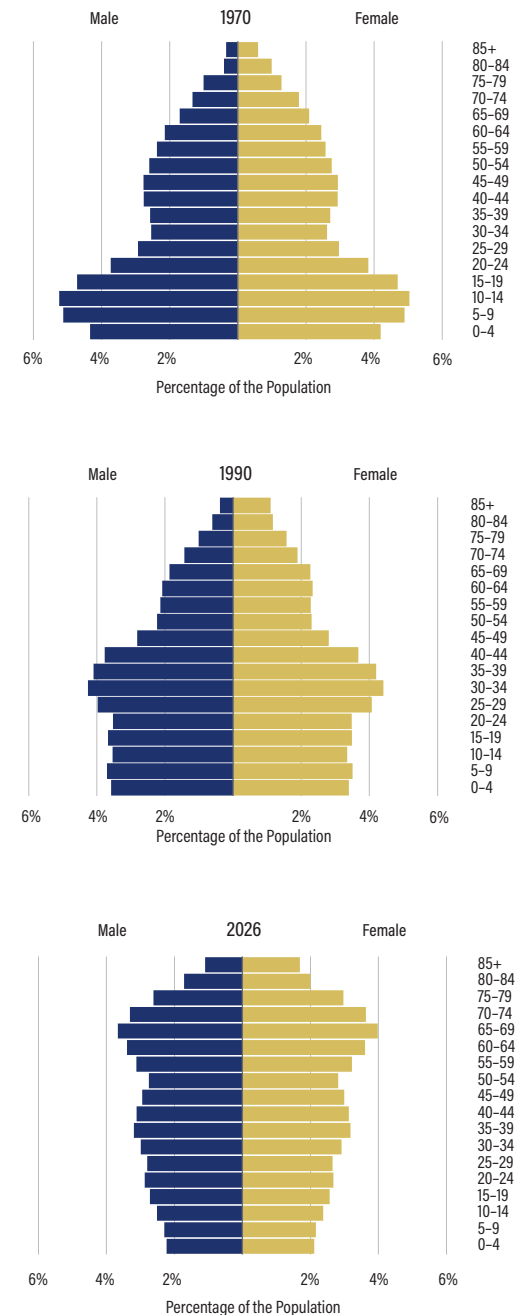


FIGURE 2: **Number of Schools in Maine by Year of Construction, 1890–2020**

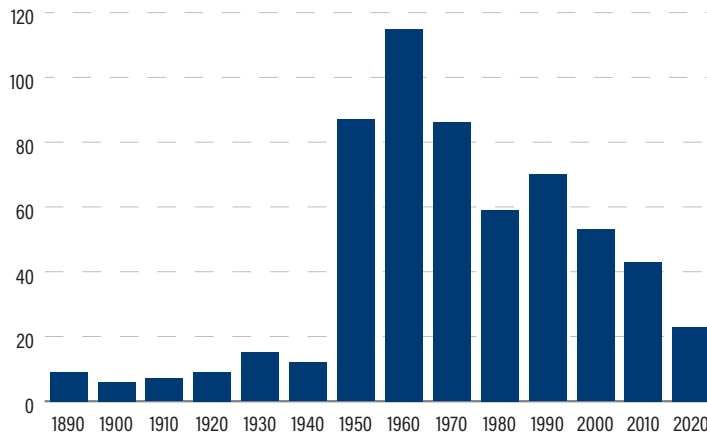
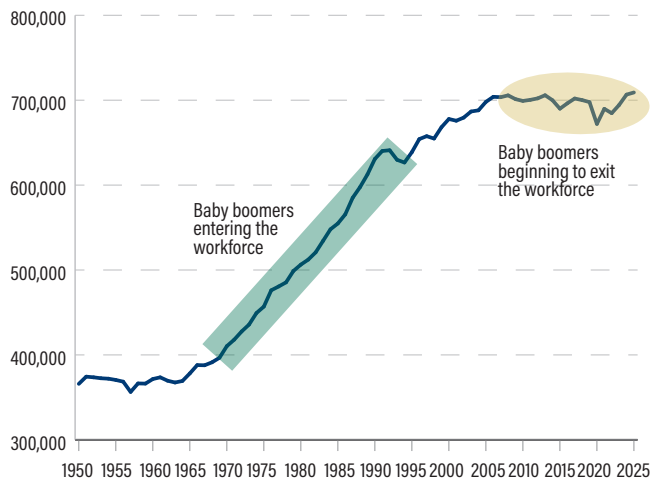


FIGURE 3: **Maine's Labor Force, 1950–2025**



moved through that age group, the rate of violent crime in Maine more than doubled between 1971 and 1977 before gradually subsiding over the next decade.<sup>2</sup>

Housing builders also responded. The 1970s witnessed a burst of construction for entry-level housing in Maine—low-cost apartments in the cities, low-cost starter homes in the country—with a large number of units subsidized by the federal government.<sup>3</sup>

As the boomers aged, in the 1980s and 1990s, they earned higher incomes,

and many had children of their own (appropriately referred to as the “echo generation”). Builders responded by constructing larger single-family homes in the southern Maine suburbs. If not quite “McMansions,” they were still big by Maine standards. The percentage of Mainers owning their own home rose from 63 percent in 1950 to 72 percent in 2000.<sup>4</sup>

But many boomers remained unmarried, or got divorced, and didn’t have children. Nationally, household sizes shrank dramatically from 3.3 people per

household in 1960 to 2.5 in 2020. During this same period, more women entered the workforce: in 1960, 4 in 10 women over age 16 were in the labor force; by 2000, it was 6 in 10.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of smaller households, more two-working-partner households, higher incomes, and more homes in the countryside, meant more cars and more driving. While Maine’s population increased 20 percent between 1980 and 2023, vehicle miles driven doubled.<sup>6</sup> The general phenomenon is called sprawl; we boomers didn’t initiate the problem, but we certainly aggravated it (MSPO 1997).

In other respects, boomers have been good to the environment. Earth Day was instituted in 1970. Maine political leaders, starting with Senator Ed Muskie, have been supportive of environmental protection. Louis Ploch (1988) found that three-quarters of movers to Maine in the 1970s were motivated by its natural beauty and setting. *The Maine Times* became the journal of environmental awareness; in 1972, the newspaper published *A Maine Manifest* by Richard Barringer (a frequent contributor to this journal). Barringer’s piece argued that environmental protection was not in opposition to economic development, but rather complementary. This put to bed the old “payroll versus pickerel” arguments of the 1960s. Through the reclamation of public lands and the purchases of the Land for Maine’s Future program, Maine has preserved over a million acres of land in our generation.<sup>7</sup>

Boomers played a continued role in the new environmental awareness. A decade after Ploch did his survey work for the 1979 Commission on Maine’s Future, a new Commission on Maine’s Future was formed in 1989, and it conducted its own survey of Maine population and values. Study author Evan Richert reported that “baby boomers are

more likely than members of older generations to favor environmental values over economic values or exclusive property rights... Baby boomers are more accepting, even demanding, of regulation in order to preserve wilderness, the beaches, and access to Maine's outdoors" (Richert 1990: 35).

The boomer legacy is mixed in other respects. The income gap between Greater Portland and rural Maine, urban and rural parts of the state, and college-educated and high school-educated, grew dramatically in Maine during the last 50 years.<sup>8</sup> The growth and persistence of this income gap over the decades has contributed to the alienation that is reflected in Maine's political divisions today.

Boomers also raised the values of individual freedom and sexual freedom into the public square. The turn to individual strategies for enlightenment and fulfillment—from drugs to gurus to meditation—has led to a decline in institutional church membership and the presence of unused church buildings across Maine's landscape. The emphasis on choice in personal relationships has led to changes in attitudes—and state laws—with regard to living together outside marriage, women's rights, gay marriage, and abortion.<sup>9</sup>

So now we baby boomers are departing. We leave behind a workforce shortage because there are not enough young people entering the workforce to replace us—though perhaps artificial intelligence, or other productivity improvements, or immigrants will fill the gap. We are stressing our health care system in coping with our illnesses of aging.<sup>10</sup> We leave in the midst of a housing shortage, but whether all our current construction will turn into vacant houses 20 years from now is impossible to know.

Perhaps it is time for a new Commission on Maine's Future, but that is

for the next generations to decide. As the poet Homer said,

*Like the generations of leaves, the lives  
of mortal men.  
Now the wind scatters the old leaves  
across the earth,  
now the living timber bursts with the  
new buds  
and spring comes round again. And so  
with men:  
as one generation comes to life, another  
dies away.*<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 For the success rate of CETA public service jobs, see <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/low-wage-labor-market-challenges-opportunities-economic-self-sufficiency-job-creation-low-wage>
- 2 For crime and young men, see <https://ojdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/pubs/jvr/1.html> for Maine violent crime rates, see <https://www.disastercenter.com/crime/mecrime.htm>
- 3 For a graphic of construction by decade in Maine, see George Harvey, "A Look at Maine's Aging Housing Stock," *The Maine Monitor*, August 11, 2024, <https://themainemonitor.org/aging-housing-stock/>.
- 4 "Historical Census of Housing Tables: Homeownership," US Census, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/dec/coh-owner.html>
- 5 "Table HH-4. Households by Size: 1960 to Present," US Census Historical Households Tables, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/households.html>; "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey: Women in the Labor Force," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/demographics/women-labor-force.htm>
- 6 "Vehicle Miles of Travel by Functional System and State, 1980-2024 (VM-2)," Department of Transportation. <https://catalog-old.data.gov/dataset/vehicle-miles-of-travel-by-functional-system-and-state-1980-2023-vm-2>
- 7 Includes 550,000 acres in public lands (Barringer et al. 2020); and 600,000 acres in the Land for Maine's Future program; <https://www.maine.gov/dacf/lmf/aboutus.shtml>.
- 8 There is a vast literature on income inequality in Maine and in the country. The Maine Center for Economic Policy has studied the issue from many perspectives since the 1990s (see <https://www.meccep.org/>). A good single

data source is *The New Gilded Age: Income Inequality in the U.S. by State, Metropolitan Area, and County* by Estelle Sommeiller and Mark Price, Economic Policy Institute, 2018.

- 9 A good general discussion of baby boomer values is contained in the book *Generations* by Jean Twenge, Atria Books, 2023, pp. 75–146.
- 10 For labor shortage, see <https://wgme.com/news/in-depth/in-depth-maines-labor-shortage>; for healthcare system issues, see <https://themainemonitor.org/hospital-lobbyist-impossible-solve-healthcare-costs/>
- 11 *Iliad*, Homer, translated by Robert Fagles, Book 6, lines 171–175, p. 200.

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