

LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE



QUICK BRIEF

METRICS AND DEFINITIONS

Amid a persistent talent shortage, organizations are increasingly turning to previously untapped talent pools to attract and retain scarce talent. As the U.S. civilian population ages rapidly, people ages 65 and older have become one such pool, resulting in a significant shift in this population's labor force characteristics over time. As more people extend their working lives, those ages 65 and older have routinely been among the fastest growing segments of the U.S. workforce, a trend that is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Given these trends, it is critical that HR professionals understand the characteristics and importance of this often-overlooked talent pool.

This snapshot will examine several metrics that describe the population and labor force characteristics of those ages 65 and older. Some key terms that will appear include:

Civilian noninstitutional population: The population ages 16 and older, excluding active-duty military members and people living in institutions or facilities, such as correctional institutions or residential medical care facilities. All of the findings discussed in this brief are based on data covering this population or a subset of this population (e.g., the civilian labor force).

Civilian labor force: The civilian noninstitutional population ages 16 and older who are either working or actively looking for work.

Labor force participation rate: The share of people in the civilian noninstitutional population ages 16 and older who are in the labor force.

Population age distribution: The distribution of people in a given population across age groups.

Employment share: The share of employed people in a given population that fall into a category of interest. This snapshot will primarily discuss the share of employed people ages 65 and older, both overall and in particular subgroups (e.g., major occupational groups).

Usual full-time and part-time status: Reflects a person's normal work schedule based on the usual hours they work each week. Full-time workers are those who usually work 35 or more hours per week. Part-time workers are those who usually work fewer than 35 hours per week.



UNDERLYING DATA

All analyses presented were completed using microdata from the Current Population Survey (CPS).¹ The examination of historical trends generally covers the period of January 1994 to April 2025, whereas the investigation of “current conditions” focuses on average values calculated using CPS monthly microdata covering the most recent 12-month period (May 2024 to April 2025). All CPS microdata were obtained via IPUMS, a social/economic data curation, archiving, and dissemination program within the University of Minnesota’s Institute for Research and Data Innovation.

KEY FINDINGS OVERVIEW

1. The civilian population ages 65 and older nearly doubled in size between January 1994 and April 2025.
2. On average, nearly 1 in 5 people ages 65 and older participated in the labor force as of April 2025.
3. Between December 1994 and April 2025, the average share of employed people who are 65 and older more than doubled.
4. In the most recent 12-month period, workers ages 65 and older represented over 1/12th of employment in six major occupational groups.
5. In the most recent 12-month period, workers ages 65 and older represented at least 1/12th of employment in six major industry groups.
6. As of April 2025, more than three-fifths of workers ages 65 and older (61.8%) usually worked full-time hours.
7. In the most recent 12-month period, workers ages 65 and older were more than twice as likely to be self-employed compared to the employed population ages 16 to 64.

¹The CPS is a long-running monthly survey of U.S. households that is jointly run by the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). It is used to calculate a wide variety of labor market metrics that are closely tracked (e.g., the unemployment rate).

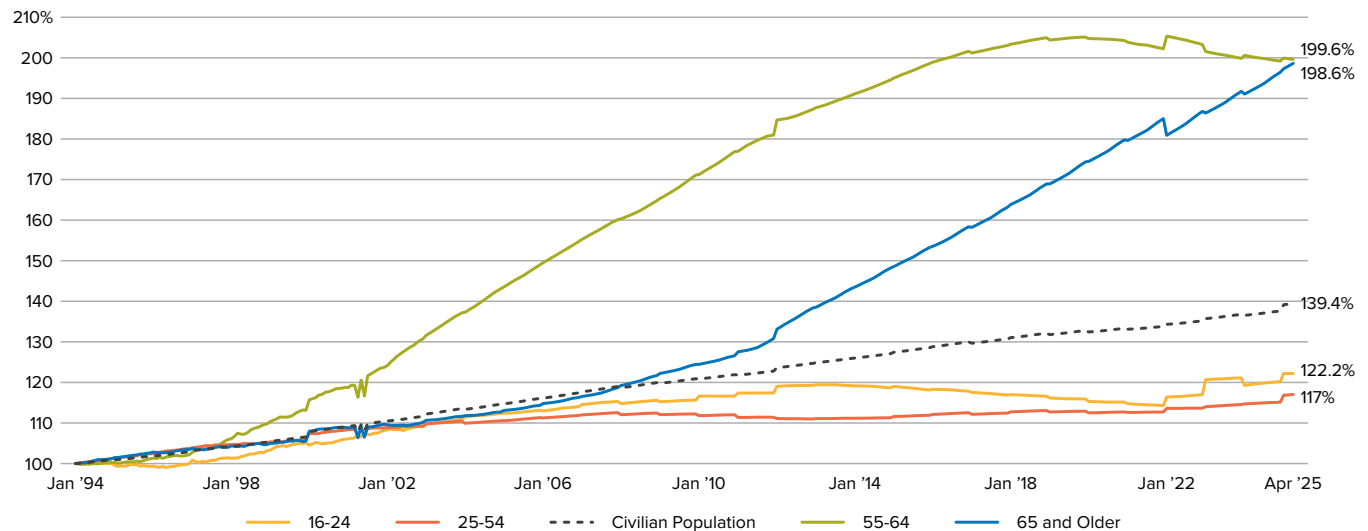
THE CIVILIAN POPULATION AGES 65 AND OLDER NEARLY DOUBLED IN SIZE BETWEEN JANUARY 1994 AND APRIL 2025

Index of Civilian Population Level by Age Group, January 1994-April 2025



(January 1994 = 100%)

FIGURE 1



LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: Calculations based on January 1994-April 2025 Current Population Survey (CPS) basic monthly extract downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

In recent decades, the overall U.S. civilian population has continued to grow steadily; however, population growth across individual age groups has varied dramatically. Figure 1 reports the size of four key age groups as a fraction of their January 1994 population from that date through April 2025. One clear takeaway from this figure is that population growth among those ages 16 to 24 and ages 25 to 54 was relatively modest during this period, whereas the 55-to-64 and 65-and-older populations nearly doubled in size. Initially, the former group grew especially quickly, with the 55-to-64 population surpassing 180% of its January 1994 level by the early 2010s. However, that growth has since moderated, whereas the population of people ages 65 and older continues to grow rapidly.

There are several reasons why the population of people ages 65 and older has grown rapidly in recent decades, including rising life expectancy and the transition of the Baby Boom generation into older age. At the same time, declining fertility rates have limited population growth in younger age groups. In the absence of a dramatic reversal in course, these trends jointly imply that those ages 65 and older will become increasingly important drivers of labor supply growth for the foreseeable future.

Takeaways

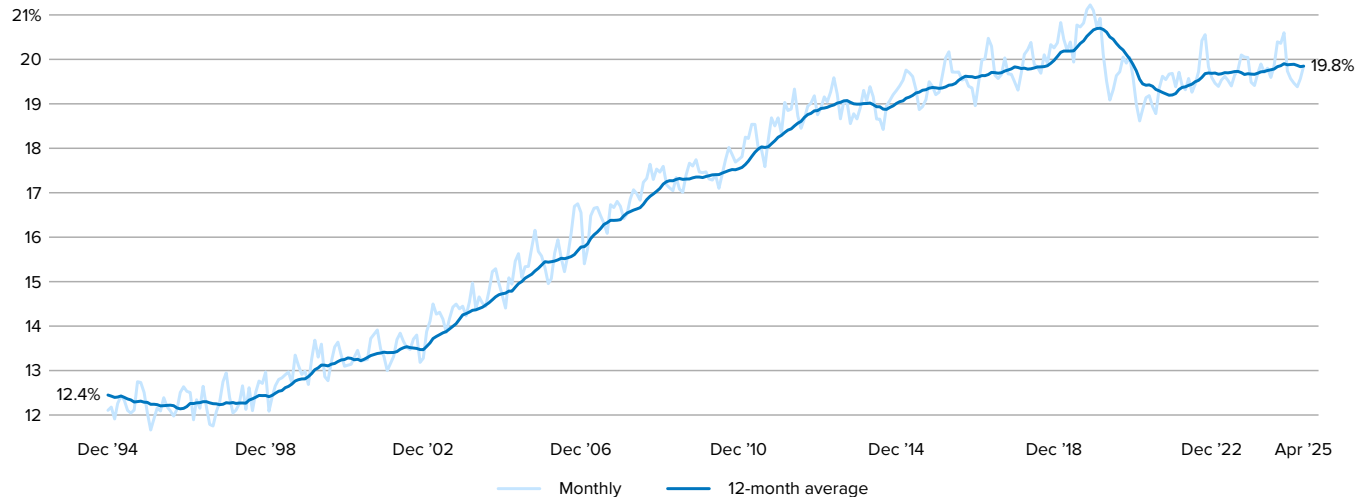
- The civilian population ages 65 and older nearly doubled in size between January 1994 and April 2025.
- The civilian population ages 65 and older is growing rapidly compared to other age groups.
- Due to the pace of population aging, the population ages 65 and older will become more important to labor supply.

ON AVERAGE, NEARLY 1 IN 5 PEOPLE AGES 65 AND OLDER PARTICIPATED IN THE LABOR FORCE AS OF APRIL 2025

65 and Older Labor Force Participation Rate, December 1994-April 2025



FIGURE 2



LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: Calculations based on December 1994-April 2025 Current Population Survey (CPS) basic monthly extract downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 2 plots the monthly and 12-month average labor force participation rate of those ages 65 and older from December 1994 through April 2025. At the beginning of the period, the 12-month average labor force participation rate of those 65 and older stood at 12.4%; however, by the late 1990s, this rate was rising rapidly, reaching an all-time high immediately prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, the pandemic induced an abrupt and sustained decline in labor force participation among those ages 65 and older. In fact, the 12-month average rate as of April 2025 (19.8%) remains notably below the January 2020 peak of 20.7%. Even so, labor force participation in this age group continues to be very high by historical standards. Furthermore, the latest available BLS Employment Projections forecast that labor force participation among the 65-and-older population will continue to rise going forward.²

Takeaways

- The 12-month average labor force participation rate for those ages 65 and older has increased from 12.4% in December 1994 to 19.8% as of April 2025.
- Beginning in the late 1990s, the labor force participation rate among those ages 65 and older rose rapidly until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The BLS forecasts the labor force participation rate for those ages will rise to 20.5% by 2033.

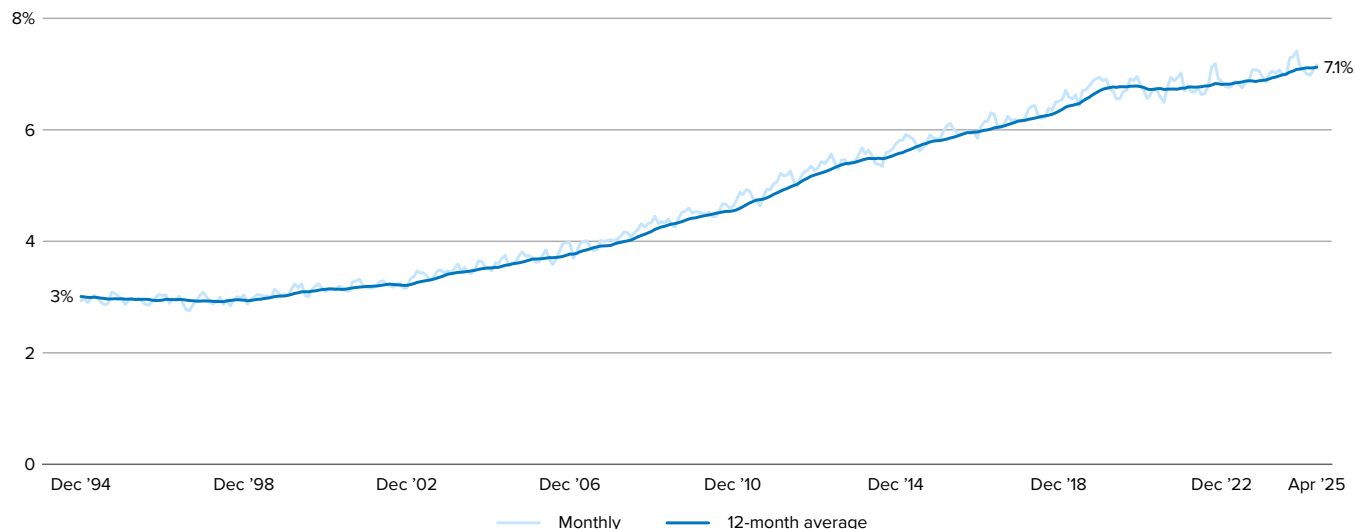
² See [Table 3.1](#) and [Table 3.2](#) of the 2023-2033 BLS Employment Projections. The BLS projects that the number of labor force participants ages 65 and older will rise to just over 14.8 million in 2033, with the civilian noninstitutional population ages 65 and older expected to rise to slightly less than 72.2 million. This implies a labor force participation rate of 20.5% among those ages 65 and older in 2033.

BETWEEN DECEMBER 1994 AND APRIL 2025, THE AVERAGE SHARE OF EMPLOYED PEOPLE WHO ARE 65 AND OLDER MORE THAN DOUBLED

65 and Older Share of Total Employment, December 1994-April 2025



FIGURE 3



LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: Calculations based on December 1994-April 2025 Current Population Survey (CPS) basic monthly extract downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 3 plots the 12-month average share of people ages 65 and older in the employed population from December 1994 through April 2025. At the beginning of this period, people ages 65 and older accounted for just 3% of the employed population on average; however, in the late 1990s, this share began rising rapidly. Leading into the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 7% of the employed population was in this age group; furthermore, this share has continued to rise since 2020 as the growing size of the 65-and-older population has more than offset the decline in labor force participation observed in Figure 2. As of April 2025, the 12-month average share of employed people ages 65 and older stood at 7.1%, representing about 11.6 million workers.

There are several reasons why the share of older workers in the employed population has grown rapidly. For example, rising life expectancy means that the average 65-year-old can expect to live significantly longer than their counterparts from prior generations, which may make retirement at that age financially infeasible. Additionally, the expansion of secondary and higher education in the mid-20th century contributed to a sharp increase in educational attainment among people ages 65 and older.³ In April 2025, more than 40% of the employed population held at least a bachelor's degree or higher, a factor that has allowed older workers to remain competitive in the labor market and extend their careers.

Takeaways

- As of April 2025, the 12-month average share of employed people ages 65 and older stood at 7.1%, more than double its value in December 1994.
- As the civilian population grows older and people remain in the labor force beyond the traditional retirement age of 65, workers ages 65 and older will represent a larger fraction of the employed population.

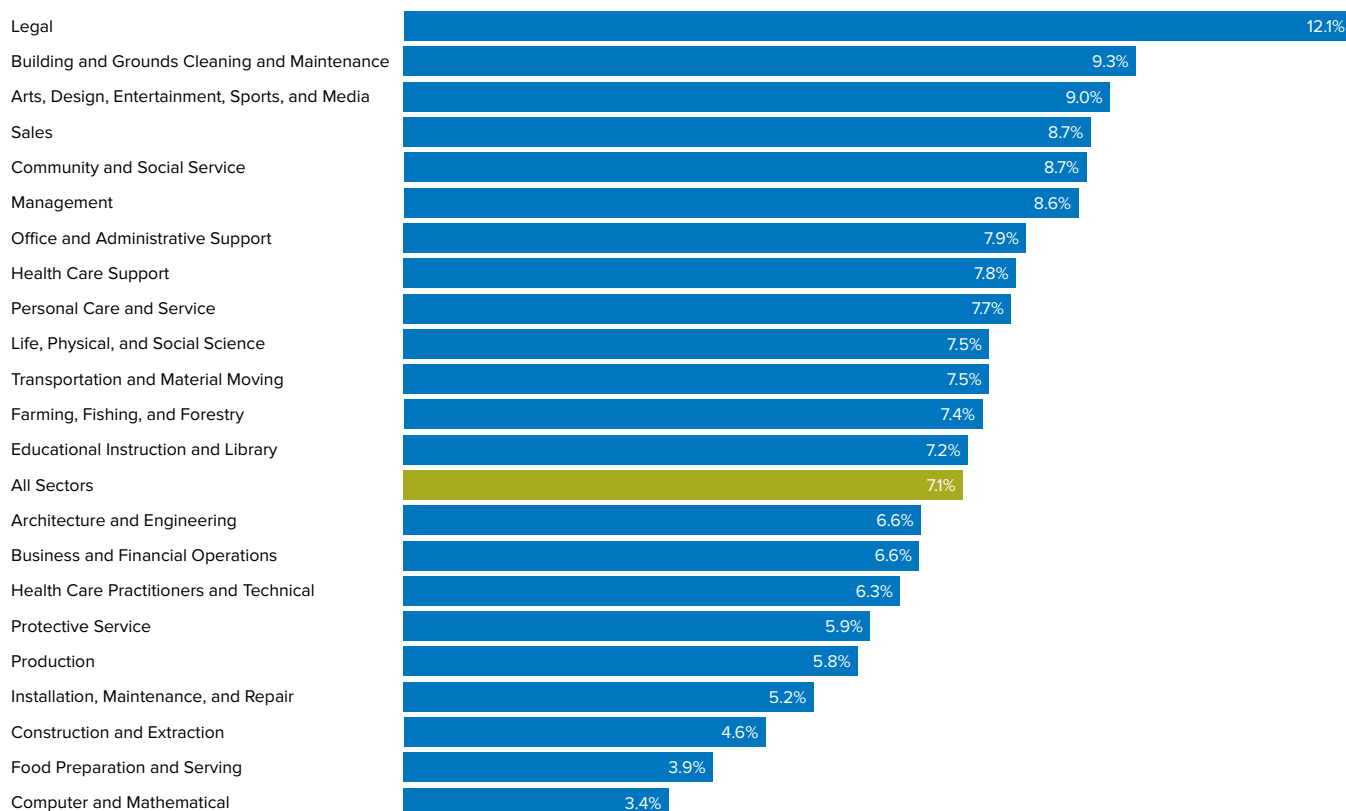
³ Burtless, G. (2013). *The Impact of Population Aging and Delayed Retirement on Workforce Productivity*. The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/articles/the-impact-of-population-aging-and-delayed-retirement-on-workforce-productivity

IN THE MOST RECENT 12-MONTH PERIOD, WORKERS AGES 65 AND OLDER REPRESENTED OVER 1/12TH OF EMPLOYMENT IN SIX MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

65 and Older 12-Month Average Employment Share by Major Occupational Group



FIGURE 4



LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: Calculations based on average values from May 2024-April 2025 Current Population Survey (CPS) basic monthly extract downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 4 reports the average representation of people ages 65 and older in employment during May 2024 to April 2025, both overall and by major occupational group. Contrary to the common stereotype that older workers only exist in a small handful of occupations, these findings reveal that people ages 65 and older account for a significant share of employment across a diverse spectrum of fields. In fact, on average, at least 8% of workers were 65 and older in six major occupational groups during this period. Furthermore, there were only three groups in which people ages 65 and older accounted for less than 5% of employment. Although these numbers might not appear significant in an absolute sense, it is critical to note that 5% to 10% of employment in a major occupational group generally translates to hundreds of thousands of workers.

Even though older workers have significant representation in all major occupational groups, some noteworthy patterns stand out. For example, people ages 65 and older were comparatively common in the legal and management groups, likely because both occupations place a high premium on educational attainment and extensive experience. Similarly, workers ages 65 and older tend to be much rarer in occupational groups that place heavy emphasis on strenuous manual labor (e.g., the construction and extraction group), offer limited returns to experience (e.g., food preparation and serving), or focus heavily on emerging technologies (e.g., the computer and mathematical group). Having said this, it is equally important to note that exceptions to these patterns exist. In particular, on average, 9.3% of workers in the building and grounds cleaning and maintenance group were ages 65 and older during this 12-month period, despite the fact that many occupations in this group involve significant manual labor.

Takeaways

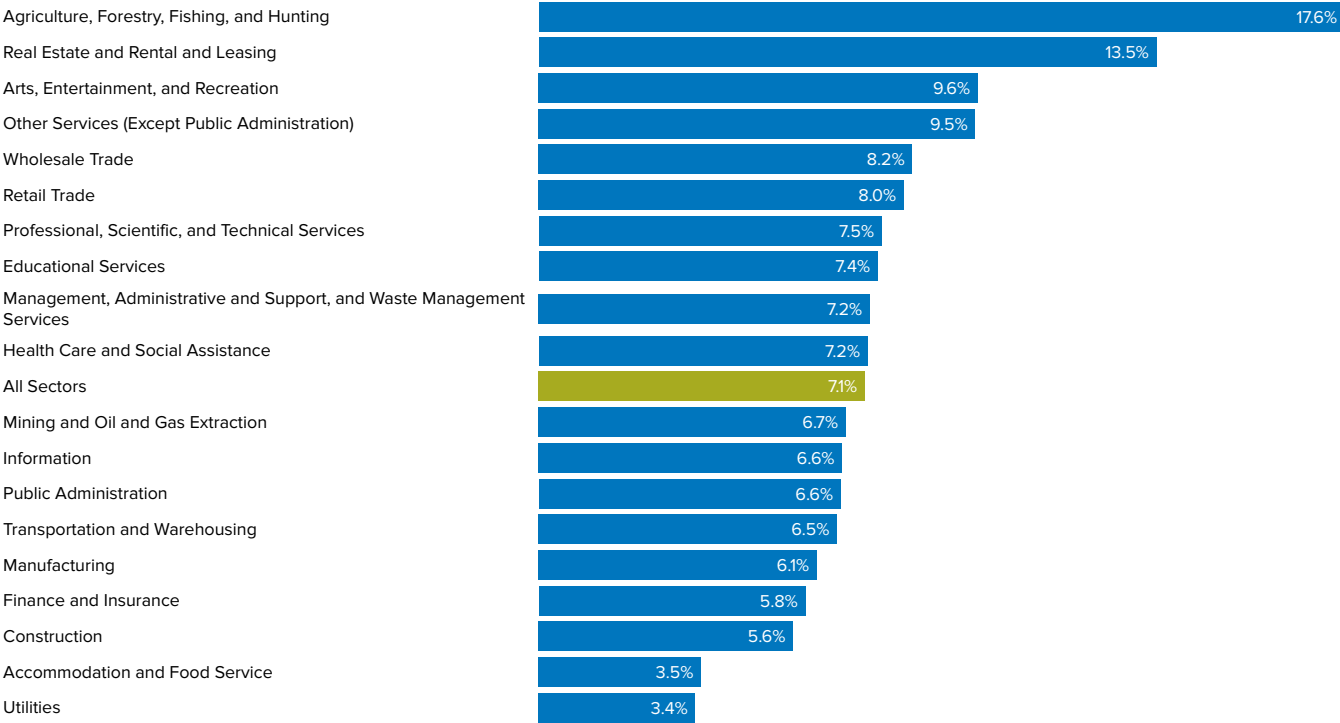
- On average, in the most recent 12-month period, people ages 65 and older accounted for 7.1% of employment.
- The share of workers ages 65 and older varied significantly by occupational group, from a low of 3.4% (computer and mathematical occupations) to a high of 12.1% (legal occupations).
- In the most recent 12-month period, older workers represented over 8% of employment in six major occupational groups and less than 5% of employment in three occupational groups.
- Despite this variation, there was no major occupational group in which workers ages 65 and older represented an insignificant level of overall employment.



IN THE MOST RECENT 12-MONTH PERIOD, WORKERS AGES 65 AND OLDER REPRESENTED AT LEAST 1/12TH OF EMPLOYMENT IN SIX MAJOR INDUSTRY GROUPS

65 and Older 12-Month Average Employment Share by Major Industry SHRM

FIGURE 5



LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: Calculations based on average values from May 2024-April 2025 Current Population Survey (CPS) basic monthly extract downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 5 reports the average representation in employment of those ages 65 and older across 19 major industry groups during May 2024 to April 2025. Similar to what was found for major occupational groups, we found significant variation in representation across major industries, from a high of 17.6% (agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting) to a low of 3.4% (utilities). During this period, older workers accounted for at least 8% of employment in six major industries and at least 5% in all but two industries. Collectively, these findings reinforce the conclusion that people ages 65 and older make critical employment contributions in a wide variety of areas.

Takeaways

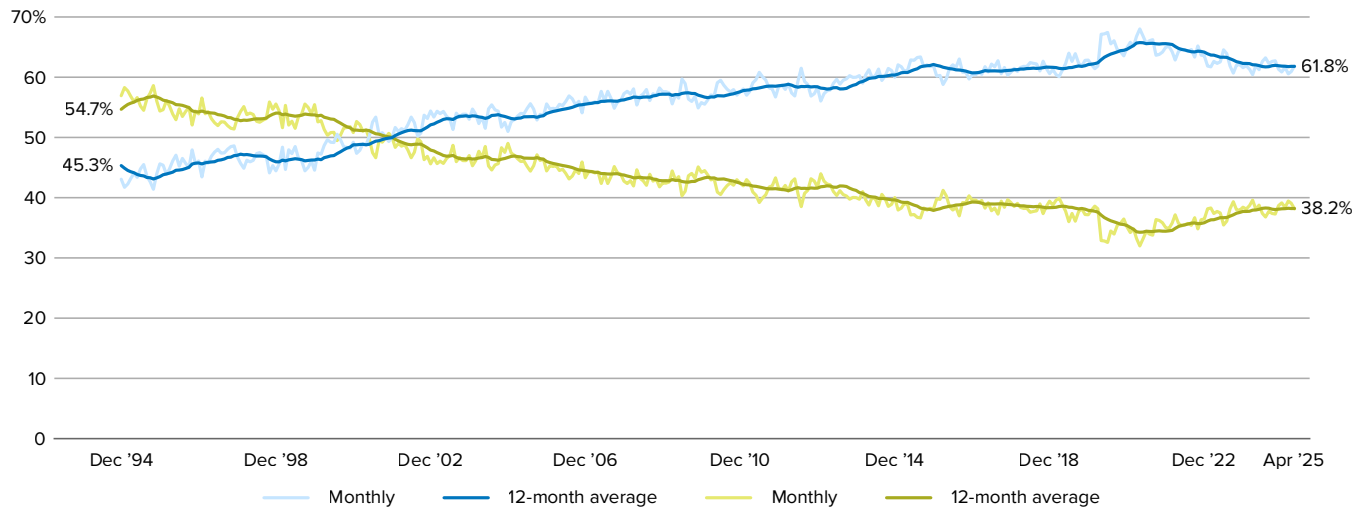
- On average during May 2024 to April 2025, people ages 65 and older represented 7.1% of total employment.
- During this period, the average representation of workers ages 65 and older varied significantly across major industry groups, from a high of 17.6% (agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting) to a low of 3.4% (utilities).
- Older workers accounted for at least 8% of employment in six major industries during this period and at least 5% in all but two industries.

AS OF APRIL 2025, MORE THAN THREE-FIFTHS OF WORKERS AGES 65 AND OLDER (61.8%) USUALLY WORKED FULL-TIME HOURS

65 and Older Employment Share by Usual Full-Time Hours vs. Usual Part-Time Hours, December 1994-April 2025



FIGURE 6



LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: Calculations based on December 1994-April 2025 Current Population Survey (CPS) basic monthly extract downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 6 plots the 12-month average share of the employed population ages 65 and older who usually worked full-time hours versus those who usually worked part-time hours from December 1994 through April 2025. The patterns observed reveal that workers ages 65 and older, in addition to increasing their representation in the labor force over the last 30 years, are increasingly shifting toward full-time work schedules. In fact, at the beginning of the period, the 12-month average share of workers ages 65 and older who usually worked part time stood at 54.7%, with the remaining 45.3% usually working full time. In the decades since then, the 12-month average share of older workers who usually work full time has risen to 61.8%, with a correspondingly sharp decline in the average share of older workers who usually work part-time schedules.

This significant shift toward full-time employment among older workers contrasts sharply with long-held stereotypes and reinforces the notion that people ages 65 and older are increasingly extending their working lives with little to no modification to working hours. Although there is no single reason for this trend, the same forces that have played a role in increased labor force participation among those ages 65 and older (e.g., greater financial need) also play a role here.

Takeaways

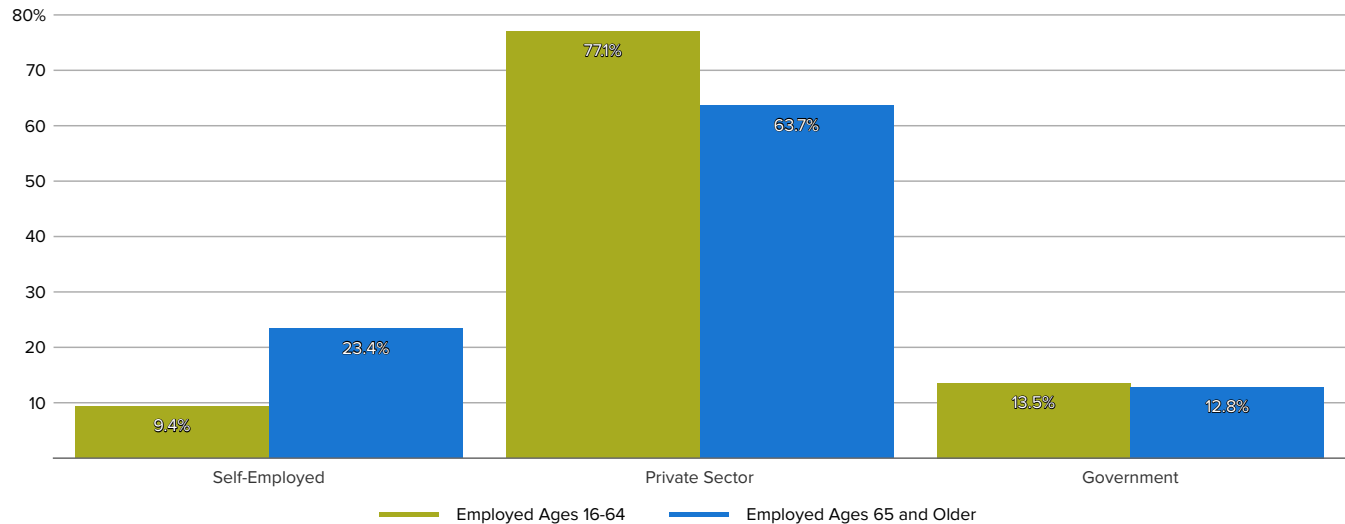
- The 12-month average share of workers age 65 and older who usually work full time has soared in recent decades, from 45.3% in December 1994 to 61.8% in April 2025.
- The 12-month average share of workers ages 65 and older who usually work part time has fallen correspondingly, from 54.7% in December 1994 to 38.2% in April 2025.
- These findings reinforce the idea that, in addition to being more likely to work now relative to the recent past, older people are also increasingly likely to work a full-time schedule.

IN THE MOST RECENT 12-MONTH PERIOD, WORKERS AGES 65 AND OLDER WERE MORE THAN TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE SELF-EMPLOYED COMPARED TO THE EMPLOYED POPULATION AGES 16 TO 64

12-Month Average Representation by Employment Type and Age Group



FIGURE 7



LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: Calculations based on average values from May 2024-April 2025 Current Population Survey (CPS) basic monthly extract downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 7 compares the average distribution of workers ages 16 to 64 and ages 65 and older across three employment classifications (self-employed, private sector, and government) during May 2024 to April 2025. The most significant takeaway from this analysis is that 23.4% of workers ages 65 and older were self-employed during this period, compared to just 9.4% of workers ages 16 to 64. Conversely, workers ages 16 to 64 were much more likely to be employed in the private sector (77.1% versus 63.7%) and slightly more likely to be government employees (13.5% versus 12.8%) during the same period.

One reason why older workers are comparatively likely to be self-employed is because, as shown in Figures 4 and 5, they tend to be concentrated in occupational groups and industries that are more conducive to self-employment (e.g., the legal occupational group). However, it is almost certainly true that older workers gravitate toward self-employment for a host of additional reasons, too, including personal preferences (e.g., a desire to set one's own schedule) and real-world barriers to private-sector and government employment (e.g., mandatory retirement ages and discriminatory hiring practices). More study is needed to understand the relative importance of these factors; in any case, these preliminary findings suggest that organizations looking to hire people ages 65 and older should understand that self-employment is an unusually strong alternative avenue of employment for this group.

Takeaways

- On average during May 2024 to April 2025, those in the workforce ages 65 and older were more likely to be self-employed (23.4%) compared to the rest of the employed civilian population ages 16 to 64 (9.4%).
- During the same period, more than three-fifths of those ages 65 and older (63.7%) were employed in the private sector on average, compared to over three-quarters of those between the ages of 16 and 64 years old (77.1%).

CONCLUSION

As the ongoing talent shortage continues to impact organizations across a wide range of industries, it has become imperative that HR professionals understand the characteristics of historically underutilized populations and develop strategies aimed at engaging previously underutilized talent. With more individuals staying in the labor force beyond the traditional retirement age, older workers are one such population that will become increasingly important to workplaces going forward. In fact, as of April 2025, more than 11.6 million people employed across a variety of critical industries were 65 years old or older, roughly double the employment level of this age group 30 years ago. While organizations continue to seek innovative ways to expand their workforce and adapt to this ongoing demographic shift, refining the ability to leverage and retain talent from this critical population will be key in the hunt for qualified candidates.

RELATED SHRM NEWS, RESEARCH, AND RESOURCES

SHRM ARTICLES

[Wellness Without Limits: Engaging Older Workers](#)

[How to Meet Mental Health Needs Across Every Generation](#)

[Ask HR: Stay Competitive in the Job Market with “Power Skills”](#)

[Managing Multi-Generational Communication in the Workplace](#)

[U.S. Labor Shortage Looms: Who Will Do the Work?](#)

SHRM RESEARCH

[Beneath the Surface: A Unified Approach to Realizing the Value of Untapped Talent](#)

[Labor Force Snapshot: Women in the U.S. Labor Force](#)

SHRM RESOURCES

[Employing Older Workers](#)

[How to Make the Most of Hiring Candidates from Underemployed Groups](#)

DATA

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Survey (CPS) basic monthly data, January 1994 – December 2024. Data downloaded from IPUMS CPS, University of Minnesota. www.ipums.org

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). Table 3.1: Civilian Labor Force by Age, Sex, Race, and Ethnicity, 2003, 2013, 2023, and Projected 2033 (numbers in thousands). Employment Projections Program, U.S. Department of Labor. www.bls.gov/emp/tables/civilian-labor-force-summary.htm

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019). Table 3.3: Civilian Labor Force Participation Rates by Age, Sex, Race, and Ethnicity, 2003, 2013, 2023, and Projected 2033 (in percent). Employment Projections Program, U.S. Department of Labor. www.bls.gov/emp/tables/civilian-labor-force-participation-rate.htm

LITERATURE

Burtless, G. (2013). *The Impact of Population Aging and Delayed Retirement on Workforce Productivity*. The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/articles/the-impact-of-population-aging-and-delayed-retirement-on-workforce-productivity



OUR PURPOSE IS TO ELEVATE HR

Our mission is to empower people and workplaces by advancing HR practices and by maximizing human potential. Our vision is to build a world of work that works for all.

BETTER WORKPLACES. BETTER WORLD.

[SHRM.ORG](https://www.shrm.org)