

Letters

Demographic Data on the Elderly

The article by Constance Holden "National Institute on Aging: New focus on growing old" (News and Comment, 11 June, p. 1081) contains several errors. Noting the "explosive" growth of the elderly population in the United States, Holden says, "People over 65, now numbering 10 million, will number 30 million by the year 2000, and will constitute an unprecedented 25 percent of the population." According to a recent Bureau of the Census report (1), the 1975 estimated number of persons over 65 years of age is 22.4 million, not 10 million as reported. While the projected figure of 30 million for the year 2000 is appropriate, it is estimated that the elderly will represent somewhere between 10.7 and 12.5 percent of the population, only half the proportion reported in the article.

These errors are particularly regrettable because they give the impression of some massive influx of older people, representing a major segment of the population, who are politically tuned-in and ready to exert their collective will to improve their conditions of life. Therefore, it is implied that the National Institute on Aging (NIA) has been set up to deal with this "crunch" before it occurs. There are many cogent reasons why NIA was needed and why it has been established (many of them cited elsewhere in the article), but by emphasizing an exaggerated growing number of the elderly, these other factors are given less importance.

Even in the year 2030, when it is estimated that the elderly might number 50 million in a population nearing stability, the elderly would probably represent about 17 percent of the population. Moreover, the projections actually show the proportions declining slightly in following decades. Of course, these figures could be altered by changes in the survival probabilities for older persons that could result from medical breakthroughs in the treatment of major causes of death (cardiovascular disease, cancer, and so forth).

The demographic factors of the elderly population warrant continuing close attention, especially future changes in its

composition (sex, age, race, marital status, and so forth) and geographic distribution. Used precisely and interpreted judiciously, demographic data can provide a needed framework for many of the other research activities on aging and the aged that will be a function of the newly established institute. It is hoped that NIA will support such efforts.

GEORGE C. MYERS

Center for Demographic Studies, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

References

1. Bureau of the Census, *Demographic Aspects of Aging and the Older Population in the United States* (Current Population Reports: Special Studies, Ser. P-23, No. 59, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1976).

Freedom of Information and NSF

I share the concern for freedom of information expressed by Nicholas Wade in his article of 28 May (News and Comment, p. 872). However, in Wade's summary of the uses made of the Freedom of Information Act by Arthur Kranish in reporting the work of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in *Science Trends*, at least two statements contradict my own personal experience as a member of the NSF advisory committee on research.

Wade refers to "stories for *Science Trends* on topics such as . . . criticisms by members of the NSF's advisory committee for research which led to the committee's abolition." No such event occurred. I served as a member of the advisory committee task group concerned with its reorganization. We invited comments from past and present members. We received frank criticisms and constructive suggestions, which were incorporated in the task group's recommendations and accepted by NSF, as appropriate.

At this stage, however, the division of the former research directorate of NSF into three directorates made the old advisory structure inappropriate, and a new "advisory council" that would advise NSF as a whole was proposed. The precise form that advisory structure will

take is, as I understand it, currently a matter of congressional deliberation, with varying formulations in House and Senate legislation. The members of the advisory committee on research have been promised, however, a fall meeting of an advisory group, and I assume that promise will be fulfilled.

Wade cites also "a scheme under consideration in the NSF to cut administrative costs by awarding fewer but larger grants." Possibly considerations of administrative costs have affected the thoughts of some NSF staff members concerning "fewer but larger grants." The task group of the advisory committee for research that addressed this question was concerned rather with the possibility that "fewer but larger" grants might provide a more appropriate way to use limited funds to advance science. I share that view.

An examination of NSF grants through time presents a disturbing picture. In absolute dollar terms the average grant has remained almost constant; in purchasing power it has declined. At the same time, the share of the grant assigned to support of the principal investigator has increased at the cost of shares for research staff and equipment. Put succinctly, NSF grant policy is drifting toward sabbatical support for individual investigators. I find that regrettable. Ideally we would like to have "larger and more" grants. Between available alternatives, however, I prefer "larger but fewer" grants.

Perhaps I am wrong. That is why I should like to see open debate on such issues. One of the recommendations of the task group on restructuring of the advisory committee on research was, in fact, development of new mechanisms to publicize policy questions and to encourage debate. Discussion of the task group recommendations on "fewer but larger" grants—a public document (1)—would provide a forum for such open discussion of controversial issues. Where an effort is made to suppress important information, the Freedom of Information Act may also contribute to free debate. Little purpose is served, however, by accusations of suppression in cases where it has not occurred.

FRANK J. MUNGER

Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill 27514

References

1. W. D. Compton, G. S. Benton, F. J. Corbato, W. E. Gordon, H. K. Schachman, H. Shull, *Report of Task Group No. 13 to NSF Research Advisory Committee: Larger but Fewer Grants* (prepared for the National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1975).