



# OPENING DOORS TO AGING SERVICES

## RESEARCH EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In early 2021, LeadingAge embarked on a research initiative aimed at better understanding public views and perceptions of the aging services sector. Of course, many factors shape perceptions of the sector, so we explored everything from the media and political landscape to the opinions of leaders and influencers to the views of the general public. The results paint a complex picture of a sector that is not well-understood, but has the potential for meaningful public support.

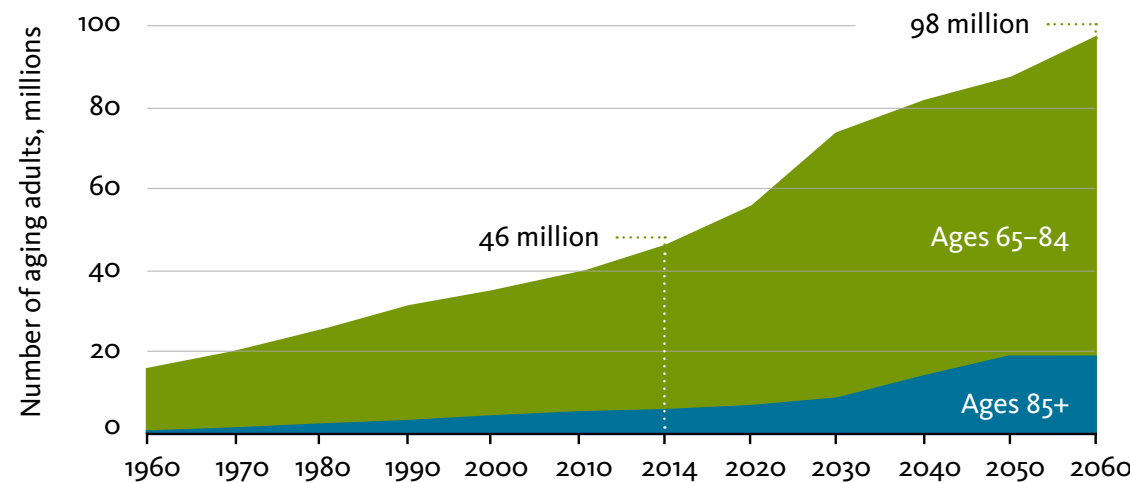
This report is a snapshot of findings from: a landscape analysis; two national public opinion surveys; a series of in-depth interviews with stakeholders from the field and adjacent sectors; a survey of LeadingAge members; and a set of focus groups composed of potential consumers and family members of aging services, current consumers and family members, as well as current and prospective staff.

### THE AGING SERVICES LANDSCAPE: FACTORS SHAPING PERCEPTIONS

The landscape is grounded in a simple reality: we are all growing older. In fact, the aging population in the United States is growing exponentially. Americans from all across this country are poised to live well into our eighth or ninth decade of life, and seven in ten will need long-term care and services—on top of the support we receive from our families and friends. At the same time, there is an emerging gap between the number of available caregivers and the number required to meet the needs of older adults. The caregiver support ratio in the United States is expected to decline between 2016 and 2060 from 31 to just 12 people of working age for every adult 85 and older.

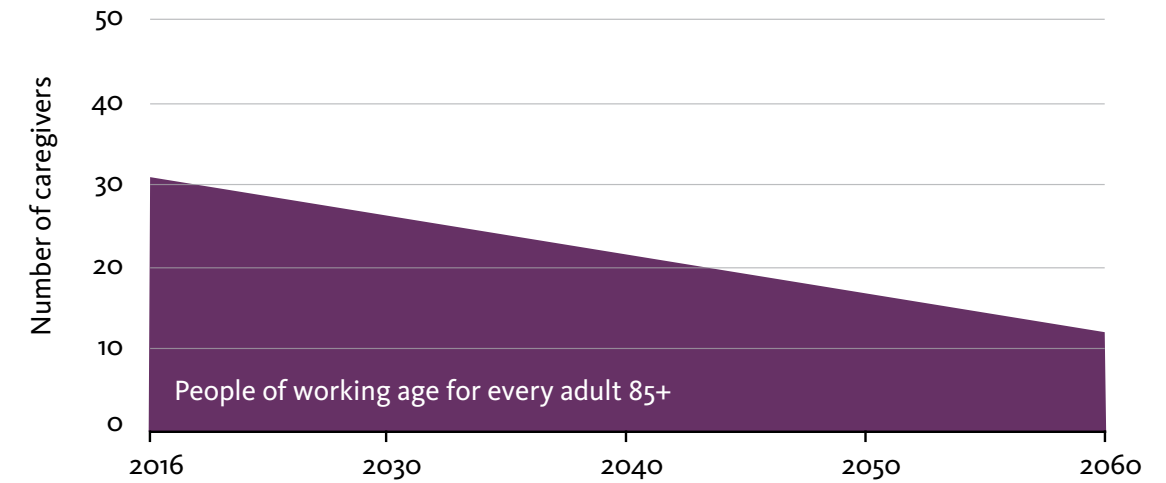
The country is wholly unprepared for the aging boom and resulting care gap, according to experts. Policymakers have ignored the problem for decades, leaving us with a systemic lack of resources for aging services and a complex web of disconnected services, regulations, and reimbursement formulas. Meanwhile, family caregivers are providing an average of 34 unpaid care hours a week, decreasing their employability and earnings. On top of this, nearly half of Americans have no retirement savings.

#### AGING POPULATION RATES



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

#### CAREGIVER GAP



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.





In the wake of these overlapping crises, too many older adults are unable to access or afford desperately needed care and services; providers are unable to pay wages necessary to recruit and retain care professionals; and families are increasingly stressed, stretched, and caught in unsustainable situations.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Nursing homes were ground zero for the spread of the virus, and for more than a year, older adults and the aging services they depend on bore the brunt of the unprecedented crisis. COVID-19 put older adults at disproportionate risk and exacerbated long-standing neglect of the sector, but government leaders chose not to prioritize the lives of older adults until nearly a year into the pandemic when vaccines became available. As thousands of aging services and direct care professionals heroically battled the virus without necessary government support, supplies, or resources, public confidence faltered in congregate care settings such as nursing homes, assisted living communities, and senior housing.

While many policymakers and influencers were critical of long-term care during the height of the pandemic, academics and aging services experts agree that stories of “bad apple” providers receive disproportionate attention. They also agree that no part of our country’s healthcare sector was prepared for this kind of public health emergency.

“ [The aging services infrastructure in the United States] is a morass that, at best, is difficult to navigate, and at worst, lets people fall through the cracks. It is not a provider problem; it is a system problem that our country has not had the wherewithal to figure out how to solve.

—Policy expert interviewee

“ While it was a pandemic that no one had ever dealt with, the federal government response was not ideal.

—Policy expert interviewee

Just as growing social justice movements in the United States gave prominence to equity issues, the COVID-19 pandemic put a national spotlight on older adults and their care. The public has become more attuned to the needs of older adults—and the professionals who care for them, who are predominantly black and brown women, including many immigrants. At the same time, the voices of advocates have become stronger and care economy issues are front and center in the national policy debate.

As the media has followed these changes in the public discourse, it has focused on aging services more than ever, despite a lack of understanding of the sector and the breadth of aging services. Researchers tracked news narratives that evolved over time, from a focus on COVID-related deaths in long-term care settings, outlier stories of abuse and neglect, and federal aid misdirected to profiteers, to the emotional impacts of isolation, heartwarming stories about reunions, and coverage of proposed investments in the care economy. While many influential voices remain critical of parts of the sector, nearly all support increased public investment in care and services for older adults.

Many working in the sector felt stressed and under attack during the pandemic, but remain largely optimistic as greater attention is focused on aging services, which they report is often ignored. Mission-driven aging services professionals, including LeadingAge members, are enthusiastic to adopt new learnings and technologies from the pandemic and to leverage the chance to enhance public understanding about the sector. They also indicate excitement about a new focus by policymakers on the needs of older adults, and about finally building system that supports access to affordable care and services for all.

“ There has never been a better time to reimagine, reinvent, and transform aging services than now, while the damage from the pandemic is still fresh in everyone’s mind.

—Aging services provider and LeadingAge member from member survey

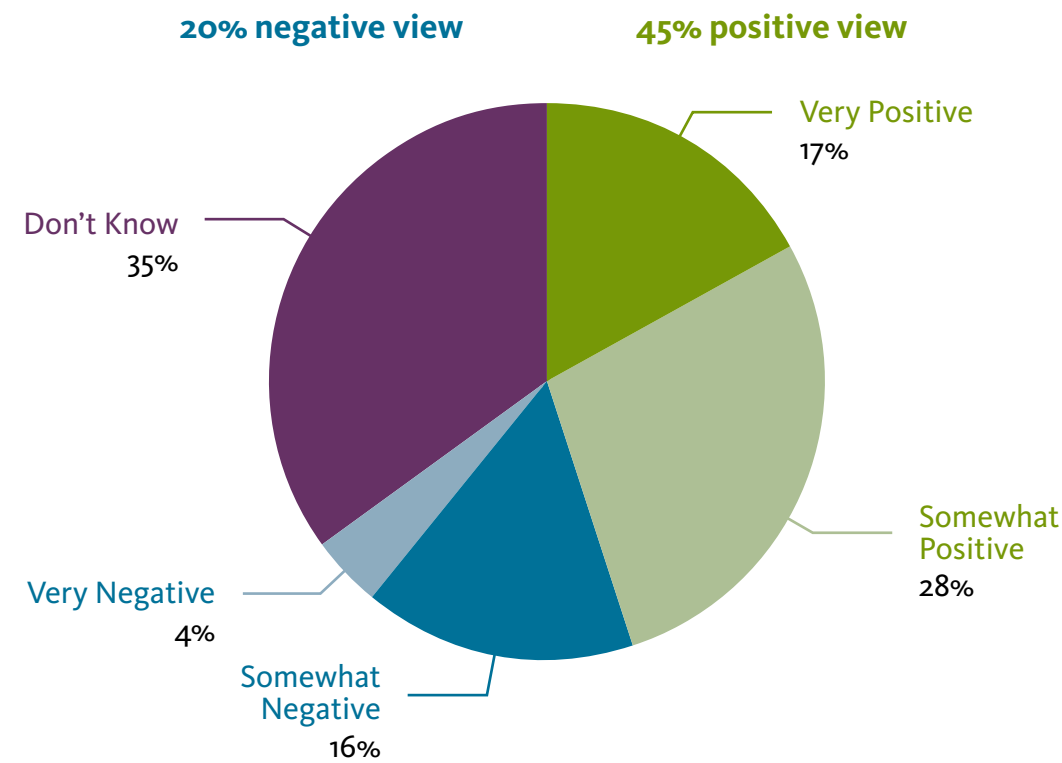


## THE AGING SERVICES LANDSCAPE: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

The views of policymakers, advocates, and other stakeholders are important to how the field of aging services thrives—but no group is more critical to how the sector achieves its mission than the general public. These are the neighbors, clients, residents, and families that aging services professionals serve everyday.

Today, public perceptions are mixed: More than twice as many Americans view the aging services sector favorably (45%) as those who view it unfavorably (20%), but a large number of Americans (35%) say they don't know how they view the sector.

### VIEWS OF THE SECTOR



Source: LeadingAge national public opinion survey of U.S. adults, May 10–17, 2021.

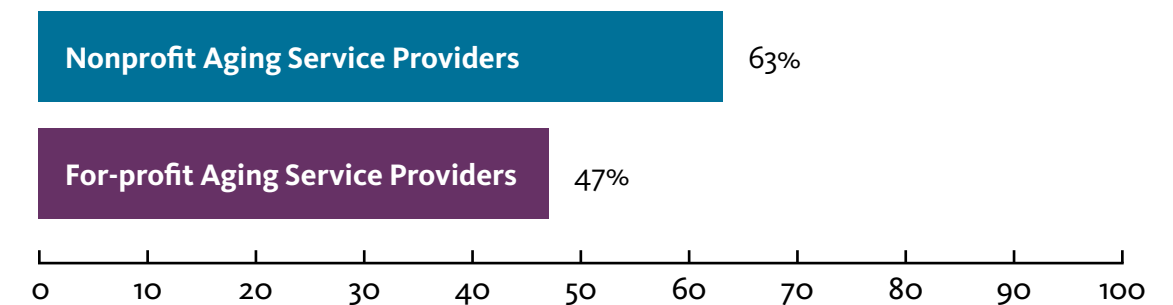
These numbers suggest the sector does not face an extreme public perception crisis—but there is a real need *and opportunity* to improve the public's understanding of the field. When asked what comes to mind about the sector, the public most cites nursing homes, assisted living, and healthcare, but overall there's a clear lack of familiarity with the aging services field.

The COVID-19 pandemic took a heavy toll on older adults and eroded views of some providers. The public has a negative bias against nursing homes, thanks in part to the media's almost exclusive emphasis on negative stories. But consumers do not widely blame nursing homes for the tragedies of COVID.

Many parts of the sector are viewed positively by the public. In fact, the majority (68%) of people who have had direct experience with aging services say it was a positive experience, most often citing quality as the reason. Quality is also a factor in why Americans have a more favorable view of nonprofits (63%) than for-profits (47%): they believe quality at nonprofit providers is better than at for-profit providers.

### SUPPORT FOR NONPROFIT PROVIDERS

Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion?



Source: LeadingAge national public opinion survey of U.S. adults, May 10–17, 2021.

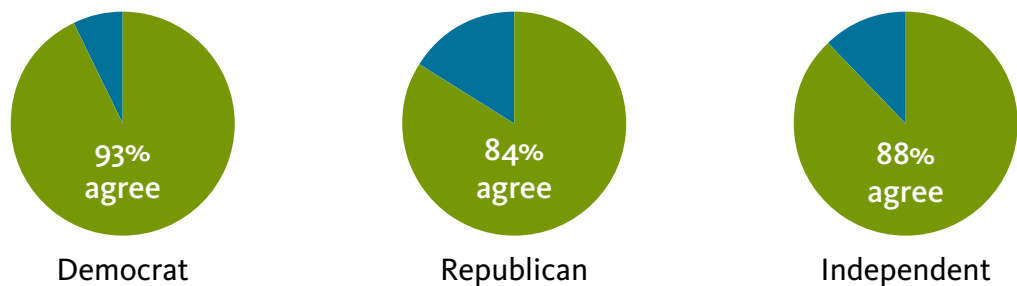
Care professionals are also held in high esteem by the public, who describe them as compassionate, dedicated, essential, and professional. The words they say least describe care professionals: lazy, incompetent, unskilled, and disengaged.



Public opinion is less positive about the overall view of how older adults are treated in our country. Fewer than half of all Americans (46%) agree that “older adults are treated well in the United States.” That number drops among women (36%), and in rural areas, where just one in three Americans agree that we treat seniors well (32%).

Views are even more negative when it comes to policymakers: 83% believe that “elected officials have failed older adults and the people who care for them by ignoring and underfunding America’s aging services for decades.” The public expects the government to play an important role in ensuring that older adults are taken care of, and overwhelmingly supports a greater public investment in aging services.

**89% OF AMERICANS BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN ENSURING THAT SENIORS ARE TAKEN CARE OF**



Source: LeadingAge national public opinion survey of U.S. adults, May 10–17, 2021.



Public views on the sector have a uniquely “American” character to them. An independent spirit and a belief in the right to pursue happiness color perceptions of what it means to grow older and the kind of care Americans want. For example, the public deeply values our right to the essentials that allow us to live with meaning and purpose: 91% of Americans say that older adults should have the support and resources they need to lead a fulfilling life. They also place high value on supporting independence and health.

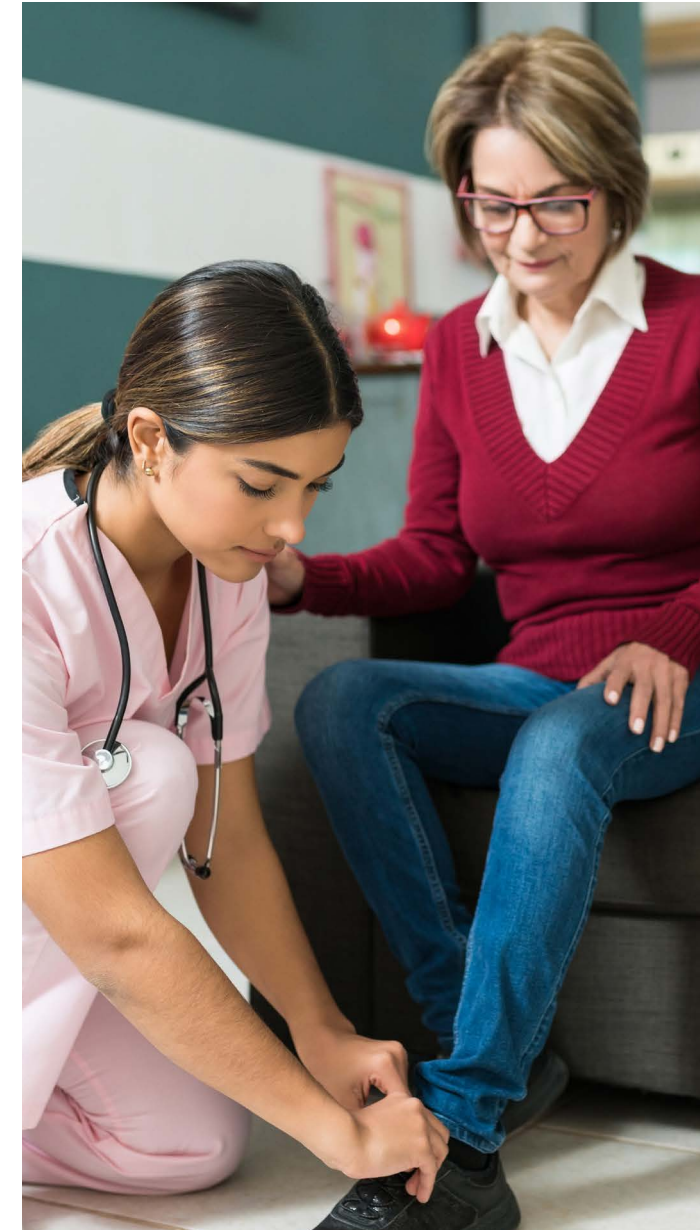
“My parents thought that they were being put in senior living because they were being forgotten about.”  
—Focus group participant

But fear and denial of aging also play an indisputable role in perceptions. Research shows that many people are concerned about being alone, needing care in a nursing home,

or experiencing health issues as they age. The rugged individualism that is deeply embedded in our nation’s lore, combined with long-persisting ageism, has a stubborn impact on how the public views aging services.

**CONCLUSION**

The aging services sector is nuanced and complex. While it is not well-understood by the general public, the sector has the potential for meaningful support, according to research. Factors indicating significant opportunity to increase public understanding and improve perceptions of aging services include: 1) Those who have experience with the sector feel positive about those experiences; 2) There is widespread admiration and support for those who work in the sector; 3) A large segment of the population is unfamiliar or unsure of what they think about the sector, creating an opportunity for learning; 4) The public has strong expectations that policymakers must support older adults and their families and invest greater resources in aging services; and 5) The spotlight on the sector is brighter than ever, presenting opportunities to open our doors and showcase all that we have to offer.



For more information on the *Opening Doors to Aging Services* research and methodology, visit [LeadingAge.org](https://www.leadingage.org).