

'Older' crowd hard to describe with words

By NPR

About one-fifth of the U.S. population will be 65 or older by the year 2030. NPR's Ina Jaffe covers this population – and says it's often difficult to find the right words to describe it.

"I realized what a minefield this was after I'd been on the beat just a few months," she says. "I did profile of this 71-year-old midwife. She's still up all night delivering babies, and the headline on our website – and reporters ... do not write the headlines ... described her as 'elderly.'

"Listeners were furious," Jaffe continues. "Maybe once upon a time, 'elderly' referred to a particular stage in life, but now people think ... it means you're ailing and you're frail."

Jaffe sometimes uses "older adults" or "older Americans," she says, if it's relevant to the story. "Sometimes I use the term 'senior' – though I've met some older people who don't like that, either. And 'senior citizen' really seems to annoy just about everyone now. ... There really aren't a lot of widely acceptable terms anymore."

A traffic sign in the U.K. depicts "elderly people" as frail and hunched over. It was first created in the 80s, but many now consider it out of date.

So, there lies a paradox: Everyone wants to live a long time, but no one wants to actually be old.

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