

Expanding Age Advocacy

Summary of Findings and Guide to Action
by VCU Gerontology and the Old School Hub

Introduction

Everyone is aging. This makes age bias a unique lens through which to address all forms of inequity. As we age, inequities accumulate and become more pronounced. The effects of white supremacy, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and other systems of oppression are compounded over time. This concept, called “cumulative disadvantage,” makes advocating for members of less privileged communities all the more necessary. At present, however, they are underrepresented in aging-related advocacy and research.

With support from the RRF Foundation for Aging, Virginia Commonwealth University's Dept. of Gerontology and the Old School Hub conducted a qualitative research project. We employed a Community-based participatory research (CBPR) design: a collaborative process between community-based organizations and academic investigators.

Through a series of focus groups, we set out to establish whether social justice advocates and researchers were aware of the age equity movement and what they knew about it. Then we asked how we might support them in incorporating ageism awareness and age advocacy into their work going forward.

We also sat down with people who identify as diverse voices in aging—the amazing people who are working to reduce ageism and advance an age-equitable world but who see relatively few people engaged in this work who share their social identities. Our goal was to understand the kind of challenges and opportunities they encountered and how we might support their efforts going forward.



Quotes

Quotes from our focus groups appear throughout this report.

"I love that this conversation is about expanding, but we have a pretty diverse anti-ageism movement as it is."

"I think where things go wrong is we have a little bit of hero worship."



A Call to Action: Expanding Social Justice Advocacy to include Age

This guide synthesizes insights from the focus group discussions. It provides practical ways to:

- Support, center, and amplify diverse voices in age advocacy;
- Encourage social justice organizations to incorporate age equity into their advocacy.
- Foster intersectional and intergenerational solidarity across movements; and
- Increase collective impact by recommending strategies for change.

This guide contains four sections:

Part 1: Making the Case for Age Equity

Part 2: Overcoming Barriers

Part 3: Strategies for Including and Amplifying Diverse Voices

Part 4: Articulating a Vision for the Future

Professionals across social justice movements affirmed that addressing ageism and promoting equity across the lifespan is important and timely. Yet, although most participants were able to identify ageism and described encountering it, confronting ageism was not a priority. In other words, these participants said, “I know ageism is important but I can’t explain exactly why, so I don’t see an urgent need to address it.”

Our goal is to bridge that gap between awareness and action. This means explaining why creating a world where aging is no longer a privilege but a human right requires equity across the lifespan.

To our fellow advocates, we say: find the path and strategies that work for you and your community. Aging is the one universal human experience, yet each experience is unique. That makes this work very interesting—and very complicated. We urge you to lean into that complexity.





Part 1: Making the Case for Age Equity

Ageism affects everyone at every stage of life. Key effects include reduced access to health care and employment, social isolation and reduced quality of life, massive economic costs, poorer cognitive and physical health, and shorter lifespans. Everyone benefits from a society where people of all ages are respected and represented.

Intersectional partnerships and coalition work can be a powerful way to expand the age equity movement in solidarity with other movements. To make the case for age equity, advocates can share resources that introduce the concept of ageism and demonstrate its intersection with other systems and other forms of bias. Advocates can provide context for how structural oppression manifests across the lifespan and include real-life stories and creative outputs to show how biases are learned and can be unlearned.

"I think sometimes there's so many different aspects to each of us that maybe the aging piece doesn't necessarily come to the forefront and other intersectional issues are the lead message and ... I wouldn't say it's wrong. I just think that we have an ageist society and because of that, age is the last thing that people lead with."

"With age equity, I don't know what that means and how far it goes. As [redacted] says, there are sort of real differences between where people come from in different ages, in the workplace, and outside of that."

"I don't know; I'm not sort of informed as to know if age equity says, 'Well, we won't have a retirement age.' [or] 'Well, we won't have a voting age. Everyone can vote.' Like, where does it kind of start and stop?"

"I think there's a lot of challenges and sort of defining [ageism], ways that are different then, analogizing to other, again, sexual orientation identity, gender identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, religious identity. Even ability/disability doesn't doesn't quite track."

“

"I think that there's a big need for it. There's a big need to kind of socially unpack the ideas that we have."

"Even though I'm not aware of the movement, I am aware of the need for the movement."

"Ageism is rife in society."



”

Introduction to Ageism

Advocates can provide introductory resources on ageism, including:

Ageism Fact Sheet (American Society on Aging [ASA])

Lets End Ageism (Ashton Applewhite TED Talk)

You Feel the Age You Are (Tracey Gendron TED Talk)

Super Helpful Ageism Flowchart (Tracey Gendron)

Age Without Limits (Centre for Ageing Better)

Ending Ageism (Carl Honoré BBC Radio interview)

Old School Hub for Age Equity and Ageism Awareness

How Ageism Intersects with Other Systems

Advocates can provide information about systems of power that benefit from ageism and what's at stake for many of us. Resources include:

Global report on ageism (World Health Organization)

Committing to the Fight Against Structural Ageism (ASA)

Exposing systemic ageism (HelpAge International video)

Economics:

World losing billions annually to age-based prejudice and discrimination (United Nations)

Age Discrimination Costs the Nation \$850 Billion, Study Finds (AARP)

The economic impact of ageism (McKinsey & Company)

Workplace:

Ageism in the workplace – the privilege of being the 'right age' (London School of Economics)

Exploring the Impact of Ageism in the Workplace on Women (Women of Influence+)

Age Discrimination Costs the Economy Billions (AARP)

Higher Education:

Discussing Ageism in Higher Education (Indiana University)

Age Inclusivity in Higher Education (Gerontological Society of America)

Healthcare:

Age Discrimination in Healthcare: The Argument for a Multi-Level, Intersectional Response (Society for Certified Senior Advisors)

Health Costs of Ageism Estimated at \$63 Billion Annually (Yale University)

Why Ageism in Healthcare is a Growing Concern (Regis College)

Media Representation:

Ageism in the Media: An Insider's Perspective (ASA)

An Age-old Problem (Centre for Ageing Better)

Long-Term Care:

Private Equity Investment in Nursing Homes: Increasing Profits at the Cost of Human Life (Stanford University)

“

"As I look back on everything that I did before, versus, where, you know, my level of awareness now, I would say that, Holy smokes, I was ageist left and right to be honest, between the black balloons and the over 40 cards, or the you know, the ageist comments, and the 'you look good for your age' remarks, like you don't know how ageist we truly all are because it's such a common experience or way of just operating."

"It's in our culture of othering ourselves as we age."

"I'm probably ageist against myself, and more so than others"

"I do believe that there is a starting point where we all have an inner-ageist. And I think if we do not take steps to address that ... it will continue to repeat through generations, and it will continue to just create more divide. And so I believe that one step to addressing age equity across the board is raising conscious awareness about what we see as our own limitations and our own inherited and inherent and innate beliefs about ageism."

"We don't talk about the ways in which ageism is actually structured and embedded in the very fabric of our society. And I think we really have to untangle. You know, we have to remember that ageism was built into our institutions and therefore it can be built out."

”

How Ageism Intersects with Other Forms of Bias

Advocates can also share information that helps frame age equity as integral to achieving broader equity goals, such as:

How race-related stress impacts older African Americans (American Psychological Association)

Ageist? Racist? Who, Me? (Old School Hub)

Exploring the intersection of structural racism and ageism in healthcare (American Geriatrics Society)

On Ableism, Ageism, and the Intersections Between Them (American Society on Aging)

Still Kicking: Confronting Ageism and Ableism (Old School Hub)

Age and Ability Inclusion Toolkit for Senior Living (Virginia Commonwealth University)

Ageist? Sexist? Whom Me? (Old School Hub)

When Ageism and Sexism Combine (Bossed Up podcast)

Here's How Ageism Really Affects Women (Refinery29)

Gendered Ageism Campaign toolkit (Women's Age Lab at Women's College Hospital)

SAGE's 2023 Supplement to Generations Journal on Structural Ageism (American Society on Aging)

The Intersection of Ageism and Anti-Fat Bias (Virginia Sole-Smith podcast)

"At this point in time, when things happen to me, I don't know if it's age sometimes, or if it's who I am, and how I present; my skin color, basically.

"Disability and older age are really bound together. Ableism and ageism—it's not even that they intersect; they are made of the same things. ... I really feel that a contribution needs to be made to bring them all together."

"The work I see on aging and tackling ageism, with some exceptions ... does not sufficiently take into account ableism or engage with disability rights frameworks. ... I can say obviously the same thing about disability advocates that they are basically not talking about age."

“

"Equity is just pretty much getting everyone who hasn't had access previously. So that's where I see age equity."

”

"When I look at that equity lens, I try to understand what the person needs and where I can meet them versus come to me and me in the middle to ensure that everybody is on, you know there's parity across the board."





Part 2: Overcoming Barriers to Age Equity and Advocacy

While participants affirmed the existence and relevance of ageism, many face barriers to including anti-ageism in their work. The following barriers to including age equity emerged from our research: lack of awareness and knowledge, and fear of pushback. Below are strategies and resources to overcome these barriers and encourage social justice organizations to incorporate age equity into their advocacy.

If There's a Lack of Awareness and Knowledge

Share fact sheets, infographics, videos, podcasts, creative arts, etc. that define ageism and explain how it operates. Point out ageist birthday cards, and other concrete examples of how ageism manifests between our ears and in the world around us. Resources include:

The Story of Reframing Aging (Frameworks Institute)

Aging is Living (Growing and Older)

#AWorld4AllAges (World Health Organization video)

Who me, ageist? (This Chair Rocks)

Break free from ageism (HelpAge International video)

Imagine a world without ageism (EveryAge Counts video)

If There's Fear of Pushback

Share conversation guides to address ageist beliefs and stereotypes effectively. Normalize discussions about shared experiences of age bias and stereotypes. Resources for discussions include:

Initiating a conversation about ageism (World Health Organization)

Internalized ageism campaign (Changing the Narrative Colorado)

The language of ageism (Sarbjit Johal podcast)



Ready to Dig Deeper?

For those who are ready to dig in and fill knowledge gaps, advocates can share three books about age bias, ageism, and age equity:

Breaking the Age Code: How Your Beliefs About Aging Determine How Long & Well You Live by Becca Levy

This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism by Ashton Applewhite

Ageism Unmasked: Exploring Age Bias and How to End It by Tracey Gendron



Part 3: Strategies for Including and Amplifying Diverse Voices

Diversifying the movement for age equity means centering people of all ages, races, genders, abilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds in conversations and decision-making. We can use storytelling, media, and leadership opportunities to help bring this about and foster solidarity across causes and agendas.

Solicit Stories from People of All Ages & Backgrounds

“

"Every group is not monolithic. Because we make the assumption, that's if someone's in such-such a group, that, you know they must all think the same."

"Another voice to add to that, I would say, is diverse storytelling about intergenerational relationships. That being queer, intergenerational romantic relationships, as well as indigenous forms of intergenerational relationships."

Each person's experience of aging is unique. Age advocates already know that this work is personal, and that we all want agency. To meet each other across potential differences, it's incredibly helpful to encounter a variety of lived experiences. Storytelling lets us meet people where they are and brings them in.

"I believe that social justice groups do a really good job of articulating some of the pain points that otherwise would go untold. I love that they use oftentimes stories to illustrate and bring that to life. So I love the storytelling aspect that they tend to bring to the forefront with their efforts."

Bringing people together involves creating safe spaces, making sure all are heard, and even skilled facilitation in many cases. Advocates can provide experiences to allow people to open up. Ask questions, create opportunities to listen that let people of all social identities feel safe. Honor and validate our differences and where we find common ground. Encourage narratives from individuals of all ages and identities.

"It's easier to hear, 'Hey, this is what's happening in my life.' And once you hear more of that, you kind of understand how to accommodate people without questioning it."

"As I'm thinking, this through, diversity is not just another black person, someone who's LGBTQAI plus. It's also of other ages, all five generations somehow, so we can really eradicate it."

”



Summary of Findings | 2025

Listen for elements of a story that relate to the bigger systems within our society, such as access to employment, health care, housing, etc. When themes arise across stories, they offer authentic and nuanced examples of how ageism plays out in our lives and communities. This presents opportunities to explain what's at stake and why mobilizing against age bias is important and urgent.

Ask people to picture themselves growing older. Imagine each of us as the elder we aspire to become. What do they aspire to for themselves and the people they love? What do they worry about? Ask them to reflect on where negative messages about age and ability originate, and who profits from our fears, and who benefits from old vs. young framing. Discuss ways people might turn their stories into action, such as grassroots advocacy, policy change, or community projects.

For an example project of using storytelling for anti-ageism work, check out The Age Collective.

“

"How can we invite people or give people the space and permission and resources to really, like, trace our own connection to why this work matters -- cause we know it matters. Also I think it's something that we push off in our personal lives or in our collective lives, because it's hard to think about, but we all want these structures to be in place, you know? In terms of structures of care, collectives of care, ways that we and our loved ones will age with dignity, and I think it's still the thing that we just don't want to think about yet. And so I just wonder how we can give more space for that sort of, like, meta-level of activation to happen to fuel all of the other work."

Engage Younger Advocates

Ageism cuts both ways, and younger people experience a lot of it. We know intergenerational contact is a proven strategy in addressing ageism. Be intentional about creating mixed-age groups and initiatives. Pay attention to power dynamics to ensure all ages have a voice.

Let's Come Together for YODA: Youngers and Olders Dismantling Ageism (Ashton Applewhite)

A YODA Primer: Tips from Youngers for Collaborating with Youngers (Connecticut AgeWell Collaborative + Old School Hub)

What Younger Leaders Want—And Don't Want—from Older Leaders (CoGenerate)

I Need You, You Need Me (Generations United)

Supporting the Old but Neglecting the Young? The Two Faces of Ageism (National Library of Medicine)

Intergenerational Conversations on Ageism Toolkit (Changing the Narrative)

Best Practices for Engaging a Multigenerational Workforce (Harvard Business Review)

"I think a lot about kind of pushing back against the ways that young people have been infantilized. I think we are in a culture that wants young people to remain, in some ways, disenfranchised."

Decentralize the Movement

Much of the strategies discussed and resources linked in this guide support pathways to decentralizing the age equity movement. It's important for advocates to amplify diverse initiatives as well as stories. Ensure BIPOC, disabled, queer, and trans people are in leadership, not just at the table.

We can't dismantle ageism without dismantling ableism—and racism and sexism and homophobia, and all the rest—because these are systems of oppression that feed and depend on each other.

- Age equity requires gender equity, because our systems make aging harder for women.
- Age equity requires disability equity because fears of impairment feed stigma and age shame, and because some impairment awaits us all.
- Age equity requires racial equity, because racism denies multitudes the chance to age at all.

”

"A decentralized movement is a successful one because your opposition cannot single out a person. I think that when you have a decentralized movement, it's also easier to join in and be a part of the conversation and to get involved."



Part 4: Vision for the Future – A World Rooted in Age Equity

Envisioning a world without ageism can provide direction and inspiration, especially in uncertain times. When age advocates have a compelling vision, it's easier to navigate challenges, set meaningful goals, and stay motivated to pursue them.

Imagine a society where:

- People feel heard and respected across the entire life course.
- Everyone aspires to a long life and envisions elderhood as a time of growth and purpose/ meaning.
- Advocates understand that dismantling any form of bias means supporting every struggle for equal rights.
- Age joins other criteria for diversity.
- Pitting old against young is unacceptable.
- Intergenerational relationships and communities become the norm.
- Skill, stories, and knowledge flow across age gaps, in both directions, in both social and professional settings.
- Advocacy becomes more effective as organizers tap into the social, political and economic capital available to people across the lifespan.
- Enterprises of all kinds reap the proven social and economic benefits of age-diverse teams.
- Age-agnostic recruiting and training opportunities yield a workforce that represents our full society.
- Public spaces, transportation, and housing are designed to be accessible, safe, and welcoming to disabled people of all ages.

What else can you envision?

"So what will success look like and what are we trying to bite off of this, and what can I personally do?"

"We have a lot of nebulous conversations about ageism and but not actionable things that we can do."

"We don't talk about the ways in which ageism is actually structured and embedded in the very fabric of our society. And I think we really have to untangle. You know, we have to remember that ageism was built into our institutions and therefore it can be built out."



"I think aging is something that requires heart work. So much of any social justice work is heart work and hard work, but you know, there's that really deep lived connection, I think, with aging that is present or will deepen in its presence for all of us and bringing in that lens, bringing in sort of a generational lens, bringing in all of those things that I feel like are a little bit more associated with justice as a framework is sort of what comes up for me."

"There's some really exciting intergenerational initiatives happening; collaborations or even just thinking about loneliness or mental health, and how can groups be brought together across age ranges to, like, address some things that are really sitting with so many across our society?"

Let's build an age equity movement that represents us all

Solidarity is essential. Yet ageism often goes unrecognized in justice work. Imagine if, during emergencies like the 2025 Los Angeles fires, age was a central consideration in response efforts. What if crisis planning routinely accounted for the compounded risks faced by older adults of color, unhoused elders, and those living with chronic conditions? Embedding age equity into how we design policy, allocate resources, and mobilize support doesn't just improve outcomes. It makes our systems more resilient, more compassionate, and more just.

Age intersects with every aspect of being human, in ways that confer both advantage and disadvantage over time. An age-equitable world is better for all, especially those at the margins who are often denied the opportunity to grow old.

Thank you for being part of this vital work. The future begins today – with all of us.



About VCU Gerontology: The department is well-known for the quality and innovation of its programs and for the scholarship and applied expertise of its faculty. The Department of Gerontology offers a variety of degree programs based on an interdisciplinary approach using the bio-psycho-social-spiritual model. The department is dedicated to a continued commitment to service, scholarship, and education, with a focus on the twin goals of disrupting ageism and developing elderhood for all people.

About Old School: Old School is a repository of curated resources about ageism and how to dismantle it. It has since become the go-to resource for educators, journalists, policymakers, and the general public to learn about ageism, as well as a space for age advocates around the world to connect and learn from each other. No other organization is focused on informing and building the global movement to end ageism. Old School is committed to doing so through an intersectional lens.