Chapter 6: Older Vermonters

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Older Vermonter Population

The percentage of Vermont's population that is aged 55 and up is rising, especially as the "Baby Boom" generation has reached this threshold. Vermont has a relatively high number of seniors relative to the country at large, although the state's median age and proportion of residents over 55 are by no means an outlier relative to other states.[100] Vermont's median age of 43.2 is the third highest in the country behind only Maine and New Hampshire. Nationally, the number of households headed by someone 80 years or older will likely double by 2040.[101]

The number of Vermonters over 55 living in the state year-round reached 231,496 as of 2022, comprising 37% of the total population. More than half of the households currently living in Vermont year-round are headed by someone who is at least 55 years old.

Figure 6-1 Vermont population pyramid, 2022

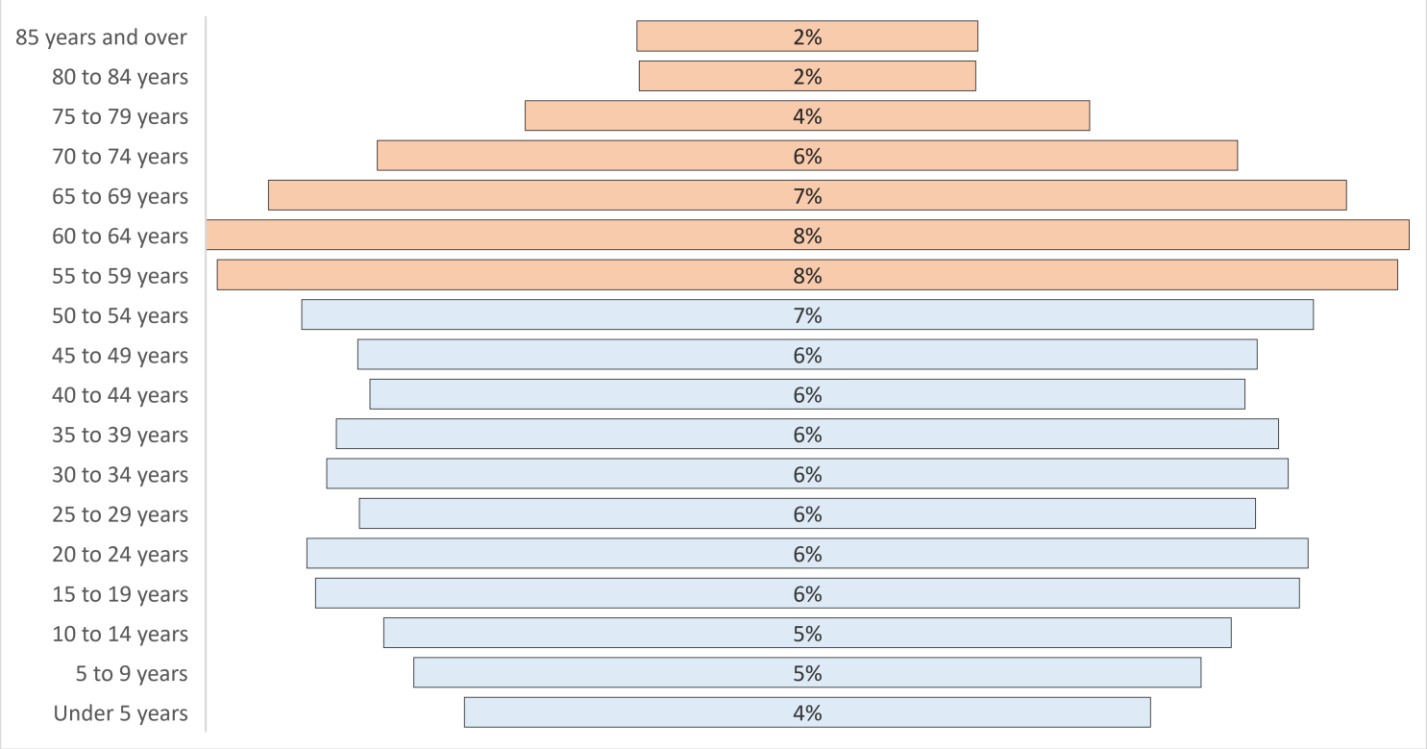


Figure 6-2 Vermont population and households aged 55 and up, 2022

Age range	Population	% of total population	Households	% of total households
55 to 59 years	49,108	8%	26,488	10%
60 to 64 years	50,083	8%	29,560	11%
65 to 69 years	44,861	7%	50,218	19%
70 to 74 years	35,786	6%		
75 to 79 years	23,475	4%	23,975	9%
80 to 84 years	13,992	2%		
85 years and over	14,191	2%	8,833	3%
Total over 55 years	231,496	37%	139,074	37%
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year estimates, Table B25007 (via HousingData.org)				

[100] Kaiser Family Foundation, Population Distribution by Age
[101] Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, Housing America's Older Adults, 2023

Households Headed by Seniors

More than half of the households currently living in Vermont year-round are headed by someone who is at least 55 years old.

By 2029, Vermont households headed by someone who is at least 55 years old will number a projected 170,000 households, with 49,000 of these headed by someone who is least 75.

Figure 6-3 Vermont households by age of householder

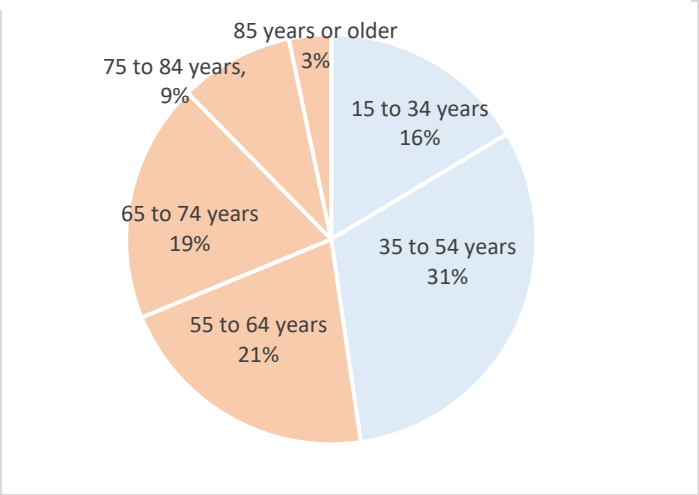
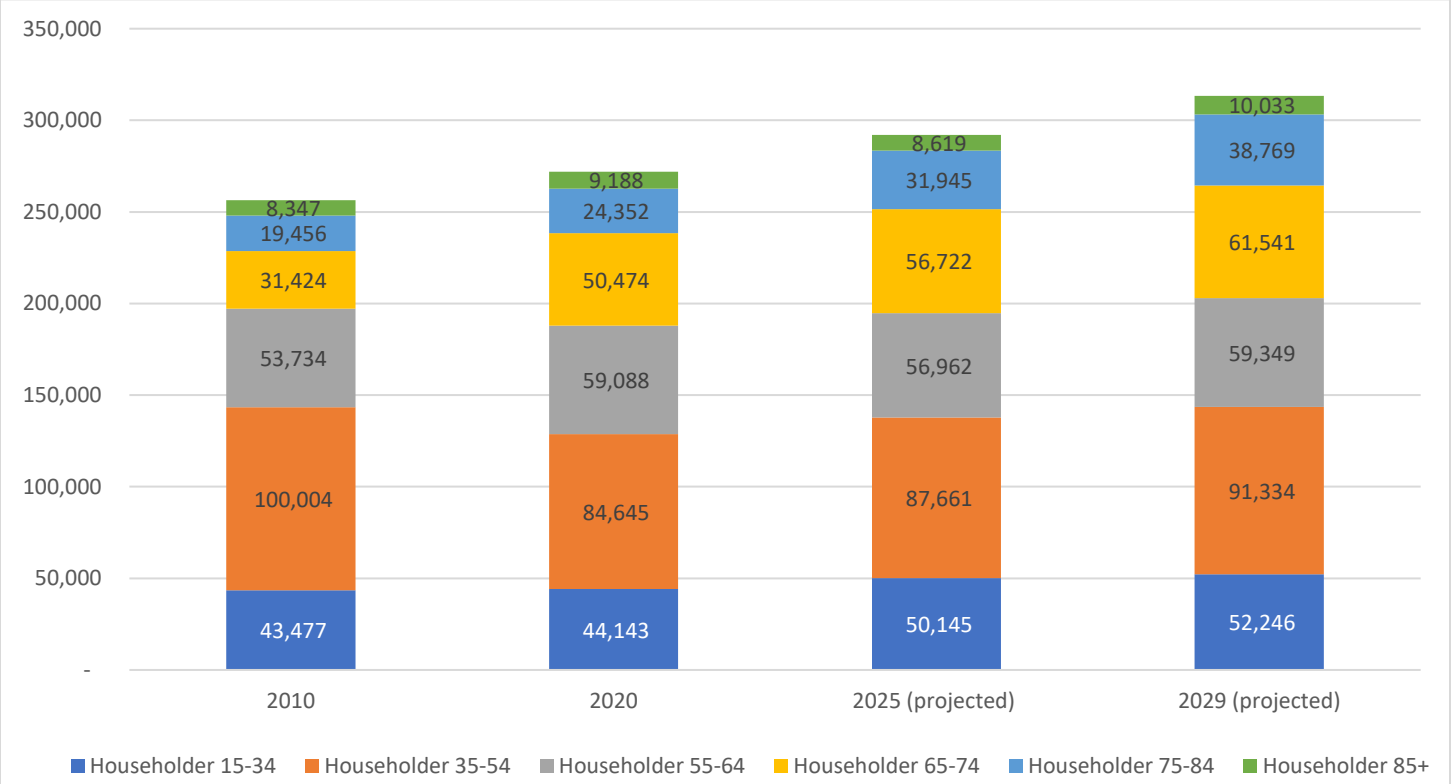


Figure 6-4 Vermont household projections by age of householder, 2025 and 2029



Source: 2010 and 2020 from U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census

Disability

An estimated 56,000 Vermonters are at least 75 years old, with 13,000 of these elders aged 85 and older. The likelihood of having a cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, or independent living disability is much higher among Vermonters who are older. The onset of disabilities, which, whether physical, mental, or intersecting between the two, can make independent living increasingly difficult, and needs for housing accessibility increasingly acute.

Figure 6-5 Vermont population by age and disability type, 2022

	Vermonters with a disability	Percent with a disability
Cognitive disability	**38,146**	**6%**
18 to 64 years	24,715	6%
65 to 74 years	3,425	4%
75 years and over	5,086	11%
Ambulatory disability	**38,235**	**6%**
18 to 64 years	17,495	4%
65 to 74 years	8,149	10%
75 years and over	12,096	25%
Self-care disability	**14,139**	**2%**
18 to 64 years	6,834	2%
65 to 74 years	1,996	3%
75 years and over	4,507	9%
Independent living disability	**29,305**	**6%**
18 to 64 years	16,794	4%
65 to 74 years	3,619	5%
75 years and over	8,892	18%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2018-2022, (Table S1810)

Mobility conditions require additional home features such as ramps, grab bars, and stairlifts. Although the United States has been a leader for guaranteeing accessible housing, namely through the Fair Housing Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act passed in 1990, 75% of Vermont's housing stock was built prior to the law's passage. Although comprehensive data on the accessibility of recent construction is limited, the most recent Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice found that around 80% of post-1990 construction had issues with accessibility[102].

[102] Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice, State of Vermont, 2017 Update

Income and Wealth

Individual wealth of Americans has historically been directly related to age, particularly due to the correlation with home ownership[103], although data from the New York Federal Reserve suggests that the assets of younger people have grown more rapidly since the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the tendency of younger Americans to be invested in financial assets[104]. With aging comes retirement, and with retirement, a fixed, typically lower income than during earlier peak earning years. The median household income headed by someone over 65 in Vermont was $55,435 in 2022, about $19,000 lower than the statewide median. With a fixed income, households have less available money to address housing needs, which is an especially acute problem for older renters.

As a result, 28,000 Vermont households headed by someone aged 65 and up have a very low income of less than 50% of the area median. Households headed by someone aged 65 and up comprise 44% of all low-income Vermont households. For the portion of these low-income, older Vermonters with few assets, public help in meeting housing needs is critical, especially for renters, but for homeowners as well, considering the costs of home maintenance in Vermont.

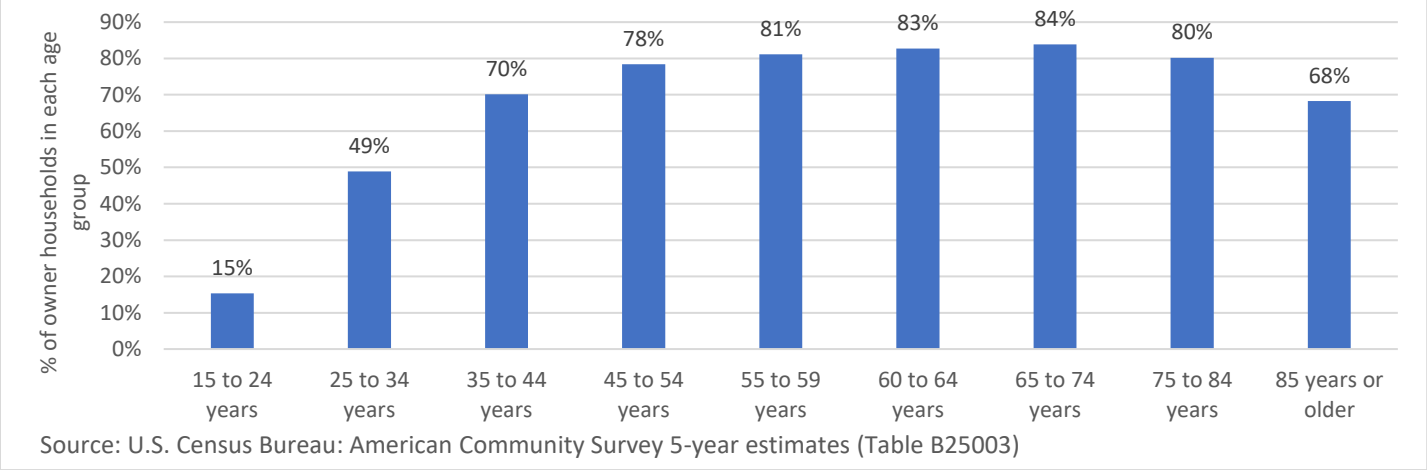
Figure 6-6 Household income compared to Area Median Income (AMI) by age of householder

	Age of householder				
	<=24	25-44	45-64	65+	Total
<=30% AMI	2,887	6,085	10,759	14,501	34,232
>30-50% AMI	1,787	5,898	8,195	13,889	29,769
>50-80% AMI	2,304	10,842	13,893	15,447	42,486
>80%-100% AMI	994	7,392	9,758	7,952	26,096
>100% AMI	2,107	42,444	57,491	31,237	133,279
Total	10,079	72,661	100,096	83,026	265,862

Source: VHFA analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates from housingdata.org.

Older Vermonters are far more likely to own their homes than their younger counterparts. Of the Vermont households headed by someone older than 55, 81% own their homes compared to 59% among younger households. Among householders aged 65 and up, the homeownership rate is 82%.

Figure 6-7 Homeownership rate by age of householder, 2022



[103] Pew Research Center, Wealth Gaps in Age November 2011
[104] Rajashri Chakrabarti, Natalia Emanuel and Ben Lahey, Wealth Inequality by Age in the Post-Pandemic Era, February 7, 2024

Housing Availability

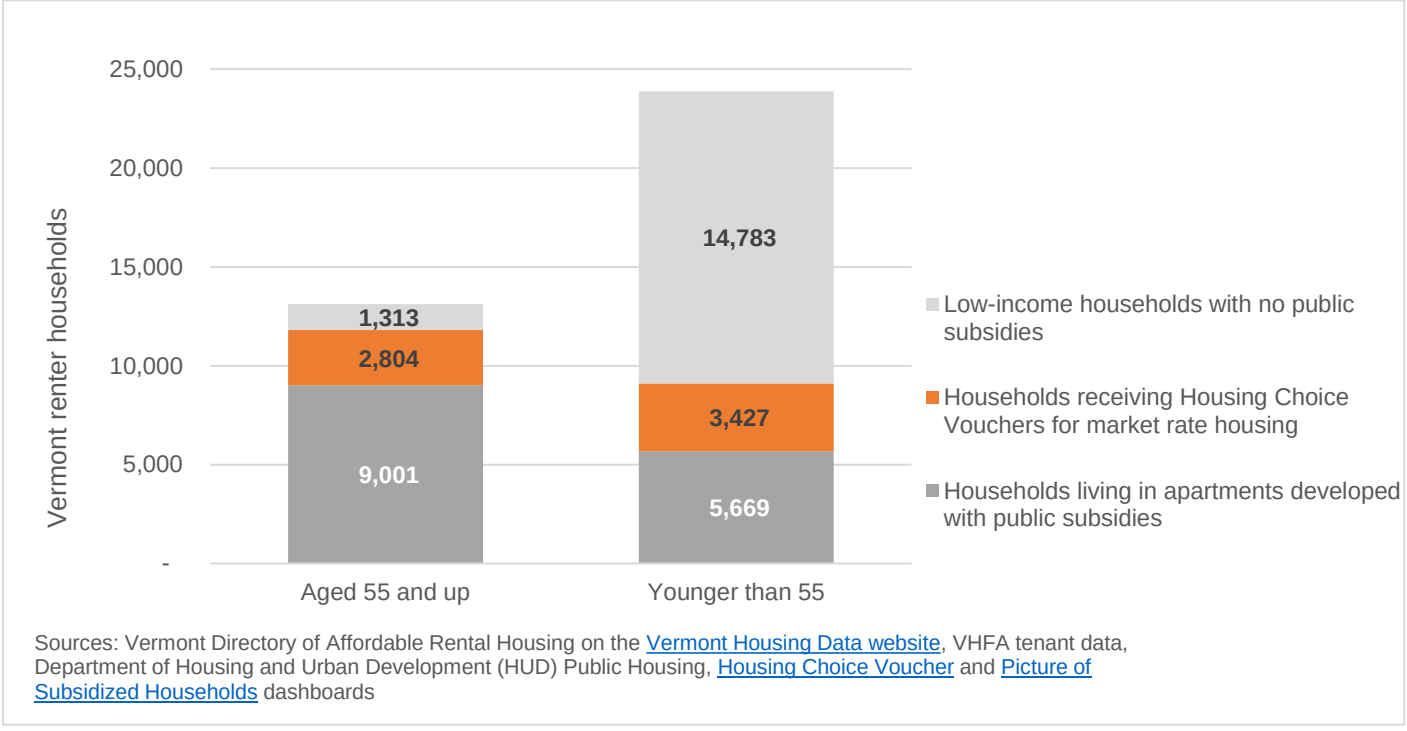
Most older people continue to live in their long-term homes - between 2016 and 2021, just 5% of households age 65 and older reported that they had relocated in the previous year, compared to 16% of those under 65, according to a 2023 Harvard study.[105] In a 2022 survey of Vermonters aged 45-74, 93% of respondents said it was "extremely important or very important to age in their own home."

However, some older people move to age-restricted housing or other homes. Older adults who do move often relocate for housing and family reasons. According to the Current Population Survey, between 2010 and 2022, older movers aged 65–79 most frequently cited housing motivations, including the desire for cheaper, newer, or better housing, and family as reasons for relocating. Among those aged 80 and over, family and housing again topped the list of most frequent reasons for moving.

An estimated 44,000 Vermont households headed by a Vermonter aged 55 and up have low incomes of less than 60% of median household income. An estimated 70% of these households own their homes.[106]

Among the estimated 13,118 low-income households headed by a Vermonter aged 55 and up who rent, the vast majority are likely to receive some form of public rental housing assistance. An estimated 90% of these older households either live in apartments developed through public investments (9,001 households) or have a tenant-based Housing Choice Voucher that provides ongoing rental assistance (2,804 households). Among younger renters, the portion of low-income households assisted is only 38%[107]

Figure 6-8 Use of rental housing subsidies by age group



Sources: Vermont Directory of Affordable Rental Housing on the Vermont Housing Data website, VHFA tenant data, Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Public Housing, Housing Choice Voucher and Picture of Subsidized Households dashboards

[105] Joint Center for Housing Studies, Housing America's Older Adults, 2023
[106] Based on U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey estimates, 2018-2022
[107] Based on analysis of Vermont Directory of Affordable Rental Housing on the Vermont Housing Data website, VHFA tenant data, Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Public Housing, Housing Choice Voucher and Picture of Subsidized Households dashboards. In addition to total counts of assisted households in Vermont, these sources indicate that Vermonters aged 55+ use 38% of general occupancy subsidized apartments, 86% of subsidized apartments available to tenants who are aged 55+ or have a disability, and 45% of tenant-based vouchers. Low-income renters are defined as those with household income at or below 60% of the area median based on estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2018-2022.

In 2020, the Vermont Legislature passed Act 156, known as the Older Vermonters Act, to guide State decision-making in how to "promote aging with health, choice, and dignity in order to establish and maintain an age-friendly state for all Vermonters."[108] Act 156 called for the creation a cross-sector strategic plan to determine how the State can reach this goal. As part of this initiative, thousands of Vermonters provided input on the development of Vermont's Age Strong Road Map for 2024-2034.

The Age Strong Roadmap set the following 3 objectives:

1. Increase the number of new units of high-quality affordable housing that enable residents to age well in community.
2. Increase age-specific housing available for older Vermonters.
3. Increase the number of older Vermonters who can "age in place" [which means choosing to remain at home or in a supportive living community as they grow older without having to move each time their needs increase]. [109]

During the Age Strong surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023, most respondents wanted to remain in their own home as they grow older but shared that many of their homes would need repairs and home modifications to do so. Many noted that housing cost and the ability to be independent in the home would be major factors in moving.

Older adults are the most likely of all age groups to report challenges entering, navigating, and using their homes. Accessibility features such as walk-in showers and no-step entries into the home can promote an older adult's independence, sense of autonomy, and opportunity to age at home, as well as help prevent injury. Despite these benefits, such features are not widely available. While rates of accessible housing do not differ significantly between rural and urban communities, they do vary drastically by region due to differences in housing stock. In New England, only 24% of older households reported single floor living as compared to 58% in the Mountain West and Pacific states and 73% in the West South Central states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Supports and Services

In addition to affordable, accessible housing, most older adults will need services and supports, particularly as they enter their late 70s and 80s. For some, this may mean weekly assistance with housework and shopping. For others, it may mean daily assistance with bathing or dressing. According to LongTermCare.gov, nearly 70% of adults who reach age 65 will at some point require long-term care services for an average period of three years. 20% will likely need care for more than five years. In 2023, 4,884 people in Vermont received home-based wellness services through the Support and Services at Home program (SASH).[110]

Given that many people prefer to live in their own homes as they age, most long-term care services are currently delivered in the home. An alternative to in-home care is assisted living, a setting that offers housing, meals, and a base level of long-term care services that can be augmented at additional cost. Nationwide, approximately 762,000 assisted living units are home to about 623,000 older adults, according to the National Investment Center for Seniors Housing and Care (NIC), which tracks senior housing and care properties of more than 25 units in major markets across the U.S. In 2021, their data showed the median annual cost of assisted living was $63,000, though rates vary widely, from a low of $43,000 to a high of $98,000.

Vermont facilities for elders who have difficulty living independently include Vermont Veteran's Home, Skilled Nursing Facilities (38 facilities), Residential Care (112 facilities), and Assisted Living (15 facilities), in addition to the HomeShare program, which helps people live with seniors as caregivers. Assisted Living options are limited to Addison, Chittenden, Orange, Rutland, Washington, Windham and Windsor counties[111]. Approximately 3,640 Vermonters were reported as living in nursing facilities in 2022.[112]

[108] Vermont Legislature, Title 33, Chapter 062: Supports for Older Vermonters
[109] Age Strong VT, November 1, 2023
[110] Dept. of Housing and Community Development, Vermont Housing Budget and Investment Report, 2023
[111] Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living, Facility List
[112] U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year estimates 2018-2022 (Table Group quarters)

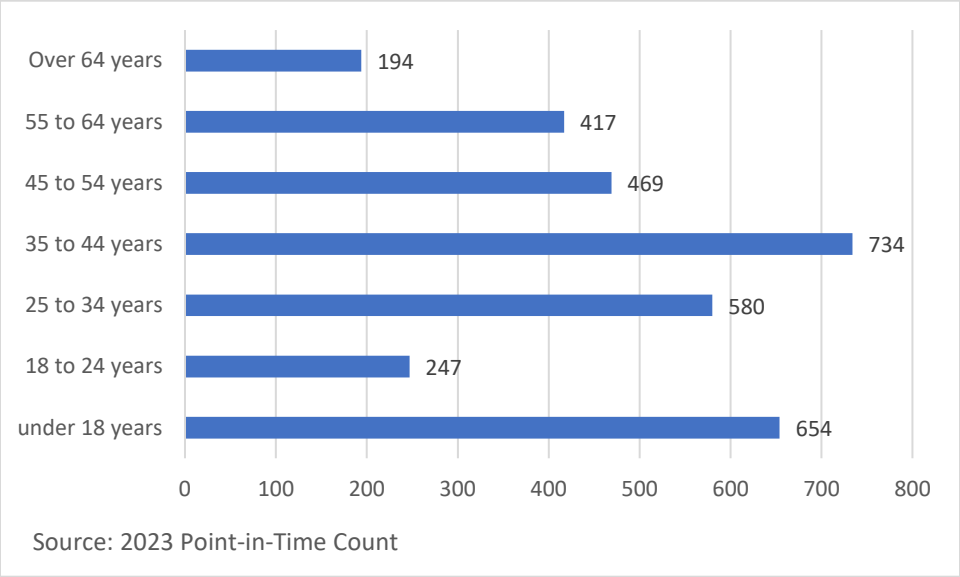
There is available space in most Vermont facilities for the elderly, but this would likely not be the case if more of the facilities were able to accept Medicaid as a form of compensation- only 13 of the state's residential care and assisted living facilities do[113]. This results in an undetermined number of the most vulnerable Vermont elders living at home without care when they could potentially be in hardship or at risk. According to Age Strong Vermont, 70% of older adults claimed they will need long-term care as they age, but 46% do not know how they will pay for long-term care.[114]

As the elderly portion of the Vermont population grows, the need for facilities to support them will grow. Recent reports have demonstrated that the greatest area of need is not necessarily in the construction or acquisition of beds to house people who have difficulty living independently, but the hiring and retention of nurses and other qualified support staff. Nursing homes have had to increasingly rely on traveling nurses, who command high wages, or close down, as in the example of the Loretto House in Rutland, due to a lack of available staff.

Homelessness

Seniors are less likely than younger Vermonters to experience homelessness. During the 2023 Point-in-Time Count, 611 Vermont seniors aged 55 and over were experiencing homelessness, with 194 older than 64. In January 2023, 26 out of every 1,000 Vermonters aged 55+ were experiencing homelessness compared to 65 out of every 1,000 younger Vermonters.

Figure 6-9 Age of individual Vermonters experiencing homelessness, 2023



[113]Vermont Public, Nina Keck, Corey Dockser, Shuttering sites and spiking costs: The crisis facing older Vermonters who need affordable care, November 30, 2023

[114] Vermont Dept. of Health, Age Strong Vermont: Our roadmap for an Age-friendly State, 2024