

When we're 64

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 20, 1998](#) issue

"Americans Discuss Social Security" is a new initiative supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts. "Our premise," says an advertisement for the project, is that "the more we all understand about how we and our fellow citizens view old age, the easier it will be to figure out what role Social Security should play in it."

The group polled Americans in order to compare "perceptions" with "realities" of old age. "Perceptions" refers to what Americans ages 18-34 expect to happen when they get old. And "realities" is an account of the experiences of people age 65 and over.

Rather unobtrusively but with good intentions, the Americans Discuss organizers use the poll results to make a point. That is, older people now have it quite good in respect to Social Security. Only 46 percent of the young ones expect to get Social Security, while 90 percent of today's oldsters do. Only 44 percent of the young expect to get Medicare, while 80 percent of seniors get it now. Get the point?

Here's an important one: 29 percent of the young expect to "become senile," while only 2 percent of their elders say they have become so. I suppose those who are deeply afflicted are spared the self-knowledge. I also noticed that 29 percent of the young expect to become "dependent on kids," while only 5 percent now are so dependent.

I hope that as Americans Discuss discuss more and poll more they will take religious attitudes into consideration. Here are some questions they might want to ask:

- Do the oldsters worry more about heaven or hell than the young do?
- What percentage of the young expect to be churchgoers in their later years, and how many of today's seniors are?
- How many Promise Keepers are there under age 35 and how many over 65?

- How many people under 35 expect to go to seminary when they are older and pursue ministry as a second vocation, and how many over 65 have done so?
- How many under 35 expect that by age 65 they will finally have amassed the resources to become philanthropic or to exercise stewardship, and how many of those over 65 have done so?
- How many converted to the practice of tithing before age 35 will have stopped it after 65, and are there any over 65 who once tithed but have stopped? (I have seen a button that says, "I Have Never Met an Ex-Tither.")

Young dreamers, represented by 58 percent of their cohort, expect "less stress" at age 65, but only 50 percent of those now free to rock their rockers say they experience that. I'd say more, but it's time to rock.