

Dementia doubles in Orange County in less than a decade

Column: New data is alarming and forewarns of a new public health crisis, officials say



(iStockphoto)

By **TERI SFORZA** | tsforza@scng.com | Orange County Register
PUBLISHED: May 1, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. | UPDATED: May 1, 2023 at 10:37 a.m.

In some shadowy tangle between past and present, my grandfather would wipe down the walls of our kitchen. “Good?” he’d eagerly ask.

It was the 1970s, but my grandfather was stuck in the 1920s. He had just crossed the ocean on the S.S. Italia and was working as a busboy in New York City, trying so hard to please the boss. Sometimes he’d suddenly snap back to the present, stare at the dishtowel in his hand and cry.

New number crunching from the Alzheimer’s Orange County estimates that the number of folks enduring this sort of heartbreak has essentially doubled since 2014 in the O.C. That’s a startling jump, from 84,000 to 164,000 people, which works out to about 5% of our total population.

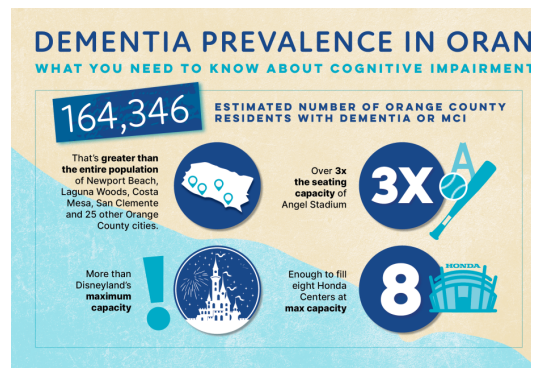
Yikes. We’re not statisticians, but that struck us as scary high. [Other estimates](#) of how many Americans are affected by dementia have hovered around 2% of the total population. Surely this can’t be right!

But that was before the latest census. And the rapid aging of the Boomers. And new studies examining cognitive impairment by race and ethnicity.

“The new number is believable, especially if a difference from the previous estimate is the inclusion of mild cognitive impairment as a category,” said Dr. Joshua D. Grill, a noted [Alzheimer’s researcher at UC Irvine](#). “Orange County is ‘grayer’ than the rest of the country, so we do expect relatively more people living with cognitive impairment here.”

UCI epidemiologist and demographer Andrew Noymer concurs. An aging population and increased ascertainment — meaning that the comparisons are not really like-for-like, he said.





"Rather than going door to door and asking who has dementia, we take the population totals from the census, we break it down by age group, and we apply the prevalence numbers found in the studies we decide to use — in this case a very well respected study from [Columbia University](#)," he said by email.

That Columbia study found a disproportionate burden of dementia and mild cognitive impairment among older Black and Hispanic adults, as well as those with lower education levels.

The study — the first nationally representative study of cognitive impairment prevalence in more than 20 years — found that almost 10% of U.S. adults ages 65 and older have dementia, while another 22% have mild cognitive impairment.

That's 1 of every 3 older Americans. Gulp. Or, about 3.3% of the total population. And, as one might expect, the prevalence is highest in the oldest people.

"Our society has aged greatly in the past eight years — particularly in the O.C.," said McAleer. "The identification of mild cognitive impairment is much improved. We now know from the study referenced that up to 22% of seniors over 65 experience some form of MCI. We did not have that information 10 years ago. We only knew then the presumed incidence of dementia."

Plus, the ethnic mix in Orange County has deepened, and communities of color are more at risk of developing dementia, he said.

He estimates that 34,780 Orange County Latinos age 65 and older have dementia, compared to 16,749 Whites and 9,919 Asians.

Grayer



Within the broader aging boom, the fastest growing cohort is the oldest of the old, [people 85 and up](#). America currently has about 7 million people in that age range; by 2050, it will more than double, to 18.6 million. Within that group, the number of Americans age 100 and older is expected to more than quadruple, from about 90,000 today to nearly 400,000.

My colleague Andre Mouchard has done a lot of [jaw-dropping reporting on this phenomenon](#), which is already reshaping Southern California.

Over the past decade, the number of people aged 65 and older ballooned 34% in Los Angeles County, 41.6% in Orange County, 40% in Riverside County and 45.4% in San Bernardino County. That will keep going up.

The new statistics are alarming and demand our attention, McAleer said, and underscore the urgent need for increased awareness, resources and support for those affected by dementia and their families.

"We face a public health crisis requiring immediate action," he said in a prepared statement. "The impact of these conditions extends far beyond the individuals themselves, affecting their families, caregivers and communities. It is imperative that we work together to increase awareness, provide support and resources, and advocate for policies that address the needs of those living with dementia and their loved ones."

There's a great deal of [research on Alzheimer's happening here in Southern California](#), and we wish them Godspeed. The [next decade promises to be one of great progress](#), though there most likely will not be one magic bullet, but multiple therapies to address brain toxins and their outfall in multiple ways.

"Once you hit 50 and 60, you're staring into the mouth of the lion and the research has a little more immediate impact," McAleer recently told us. "If you can stop the first couple of dominos from falling, you'll chip away at the larger problem."

Please, science. Do your stuff.

[Newsroom Guidelines](#)

[News Tips](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Report an Error](#)

Subject

Tags: [Health](#), [public health](#), [senior citizens](#), [seniors](#), [Top Stories OCR](#)

Author **Teri Sforza** | Reporter

Teri Sforza is one of the lead reporters on the OCR/SCNG probe of fraud, abuse and death in the Southern California addiction treatment industry. Our "Rehab Riviera" coverage won first place for investigative reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association, first place for projects reporting from Best of the West and is a finalist for the National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation's print award, competing with the New York Times, the Washington Post and ProPublica. Sforza birthed the Watchdog column for The Orange County Register in 2008, aiming to keep a critical (but good-humored) eye on governments and nonprofits, large and small. It won first place for public service reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association in 2010. She also contributed to the OCR's Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation of fertility fraud at UC Irvine, covered what was then the largest municipal bankruptcy in America's history, and is the author of "The Strangest Song," the first book to tell the story of a genetic condition called Williams syndrome and the extraordinary musicality of many of the people who have it. She earned her M.F.A. from UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television, and enjoys making documentaries, including the OCR's first: "The Boy Monk," a story that was also told as a series in print. Watchdogs need help: Point us to documents that can help tell stories that need to be told, and we'll do the rest. Send tips to watchdog@ocregister.com.

tsforza@scng.com

[Follow Teri Sforza @terisforza](#)

