

The **eReview** provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



## **Aging Canadians: Preparing for an older Canada**

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The numbers are in, and they're crystal clear: Canada is growing older. We know that as the baby boomers are already turning 65, that generation will swell the ranks of seniors. Add to that the fact that each generation since the boomers has had fewer children and we end up with fewer family caregivers and many more aging parents in need of care.

Statistics Canada estimates, in fact, that by 2015, seniors will outnumber children in Canada. [1] To put a finer point on it: in 2005 Statistics Canada estimated that there were 135 children per 100 seniors in Canada. In 2031, they estimate that there will be between 54 and 71 children per 100 seniors depending on how the population grows or declines between now and then. [2]

The traditional structure of Canada's population isn't quite turned on it's head, but it's shoulders are getting sore.

The aging of Canada's society hasn't happened suddenly, or for one simple reason. Canadians are living longer; this will mean more people live longer past the age of 65. Families are choosing to have fewer children, and later in life. This means both fewer caregivers for our seniors and the eventual need for today's children to juggle the needs of their own kids and their parents simultaneously.

In order to maintain our population by birth alone, Canadian women would need to have an average of 2.1 children each over their reproductive lifetime. 1971 was the last time Canada's birthrate was that high. [3] In 2006, the average was 1.59. [4] An average of approximately 100,000 abortions per year since 2000 hasn't helped matters. [5]

Is immigration the solution? Some experts have concerns that immigration will not help. James Bissett, former head of the Immigration Foreign Service writes this:

"The percentage of migrants who come to Canada because of their education, training or occupation is only approximately 25 per cent. The rest are either relatives of these or previous immigrants, or they are refugees or other humanitarian cases. These latter immigrants do not have to meet any selection criteria other than to comply with health and criminal/security standards. Many are parents and grandparents of successful applicants... No credible demographer believes the aging issue can be solved through immigration. In fact, as noted

above, current immigration practices may be compounding the problems associated with an aging population." [6]

This massive growth in the over-65 Canadian population requires that families, communities, and governments start planning now. We know from current healthcare costs that the government alone cannot sustain the current level of care on the wages of fewer working citizens. Families and communities need to work with seniors to decide what they need. Then government can respond with needed supports for families and communities, to allow them to care for their aging citizens, parents and grandparents.

How will we care well for our grandparents when they outnumber our kids? How will we care for our aging parents when they outnumber us? A recent study commissioned by the home-care company Home Instead Senior Care found that "[f]ive million Canadians are caring for a loved one with long-term health problems, and for one-quarter of them, that's a full-time job on top of work and other family responsibilities." [7]

Family will continue to play a role: even adult children far away can spend time getting to know what local services are available to help their aging parents stay in their home. That will be easier for those who stay geographically close, but this is increasingly not the case.

Neighbours and local community also play a role. Is there a neighbourhood child looking for part time work? What about cutting the lawn of the senior citizen around the corner? Many communities already operate Meals on Wheels programs, which provide nutritious meals to seniors no longer able to cook their own.

Where, if at all, do governments fit into this? Governments need families and communities to provide care, because healthcare costs for a large and growing senior population are simply not sustainable. What governments can do, however, is learn from the grassroots care providers as to what is needed.

Employers will also need to be flexible, as adult children will need to have flexible work schedules in order to address the needs of aging parents.

Yes, Canada is growing older. The numbers don't lie. The changes described above mean that this will have to be a societal effort, beginning with families. As families, communities and governments, we need to plan ahead soon so that we can provide quality care to all of our parents and grandparents as they grow older.

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## Endnotes

[1] Statistics Canada. (2005). Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories 2005-2031. Ottawa: Minister of Industry. p. 45. Retrieved April 16, 2009 from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/91-520-XIE/0010591-520-XIE.htm>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Statistics Canada. (2008) Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada 2005 and 2006. Ottawa: Minister of Industry. p. 29. Retrieved April 16, 2009 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-209-x/91-209-x2004000-eng.pdf>

[4] Statistics Canada. (2008). Births: 2006. Ottawa: Minister of Industry. Retrieved April 16, 2009 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/84f0210x/2006000/5201672-eng.htm>

[5] Statistics Canada. (2008). Induced Abortion Statistics, 2005. Ottawa: Minister of Industry.

Retrieved April 16, 2009 from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/82-223-XIE/82-223-XIE2008000.pdf>

[6] Bissett, J. (2008). *Demography is Destiny: Toward a Canada-First Immigration Policy*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Studies. Retrieved April 20, 2009 from [http://www.policystudies.ca/documents/Demography\\_is\\_Destiny.pdf](http://www.policystudies.ca/documents/Demography_is_Destiny.pdf)

[7] Proudfoot, Sharon. (2009, April 16). Millions caring for ill relative; Report finds senior care 'the new day care'. *The Ottawa Citizen*, pp. A1, A12.