

What's in your future?

To know what lies ahead — look back to the year you were born

By Daniel Stoffman
(Adapted with permission,
Canadian Living)

First the good news. Teenagers who couldn't find jobs last summer can stop worrying about their economic futures because their services are going to be in big demand throughout their lives. The decade will be a golden age for the arts in Canada, as symphonies, theatres and museums get more support than they've ever had.

Now the bad news. Women in their late 40s are going to be caught between the conflicting demands of aging parents, teenage children and careers, and also become prime candidates for strokes and heart attacks.

If the intriguing predictions from David Foot, an economist at the University of Toronto who specializes in demographics, contradict others you've heard recently, it's because Foot is a futurist with a difference. Most futurists *extrapolate* (draw from) current trends, which is why they usually predict a future that looks like the present, only more so. Foot applies the realities of demographics to the future and, as a result, often comes up with a future that looks radically different from the present. His track record for accuracy is excellent.

Demography is the statistical study of human populations. A demographer works with basic facts about the make-up of the population, for example, how many people are born and how many die in a given year; how many people are 14 and how many are 40.

The interesting thing about a demographer's viewpoint is that it gives deeper significance to what others assume are just accidents of individual personality. Your 31-year-old nephew has never held down a good job and is still living at home. It may not be because he lacks ambition but simply because there are too many other 31-year-olds competing for the same jobs.

As for your 14-year-old daughter who earned enough money baby-sitting to spend \$2,000 on her own stereo system, she may not be the world-beater you think she is, because she's just benefiting from the law of supply and demand. There are lots of babies these days and not many teenagers to look after them on a Saturday night.

In Canada, the most important demographic fact is whether an individual is a baby

boomer (born between 1947 and 1966 who make up a third of the population). Baby boomers have a lot more in common with other boomers than with non-boomers. "Someone who is 49 has had a very different experience from someone who is 42," Foot says.

That means today's youngsters will be in large classes in school and, later on, will encounter stiff competition for university admission and jobs.

THE 15-TO-24-YEAR-OLDS

To Foot, the most interesting thing about members of the baby bust generation is that "they get

wonder why their 26-year-old brother or sister is such a bum. They don't understand there is far less competition for them than there was for their older brother or sister."

Today's teenagers will get multiple job offers and high starting salaries. "A university

put all their energies into looking after themselves.

They found themselves in bulging classrooms from their first day in Grade 1 and they've been fighting for space ever since. Their hard-won educations weren't worth much because so many others had the same degrees. They entered the job market in the early 80s only to discover the first wave of baby boomers had already laid claim to most of the jobs. The early boomers scooped up most of the apartments as well, driving rents sky-high. The same group flooded the urban real estate market when a house was still affordable, while many late boomers still haven't got together a down payment. To top it all off, the late boomers have just endured, or are enduring, the second severe recession of their careers.

"People in their late 20s today are left shaking their heads," says Foot. "They've had a spotty career profile. They feel they have no hope of getting a house of their own and some of them have been forced into activities they'd prefer not to be part of, such as drug dealing, because these were the only activities that could generate them an income."

Those with decent jobs are working extra-long hours to try to distinguish themselves from the person next to them in hopes of a promotion.

"That's why the amount of leisure time went down in the 80s," says Foot. "All the baby boomers are competing with one another." The late boomers have one major objective during the 90s, to get that first house. When and if they can get it will influence their decisions about starting a family. House prices went down during the early part of the recession but they are already picking up because of demand from late boomers. But because today's 15-to-24-year-old group is so small, demand will soften in the mid-90s, and house prices will go into decline relative to other investments. Any late boomer who still wants one will finally be able to afford a house by the year 2000.

As for their general outlook, Foot says late boomers will just have to adjust to living in a large cohort group for their whole lives. He says it's important that career counsellors, psychologists and others dealing with these people understand the demographic factors that underlie their problems.



Let's look at the various age groups in Canada, starting with the youngest, and see what their future holds.

TODAY'S CHILDREN

Kids born between 1976 and the present are the Baby Boom Echo. They are children of baby boomers. Although less numerous than boomers themselves, they are a bigger group than today's teenagers who are the "baby bust" generation of the 70s. "Births are the highest they have been for 30 years, but the echo is a fleeting phenomenon", Foot explains "The peak of the baby boom was in 1960, so women born then are now 31, and the probability of getting pregnant declines quite dramatically in your 30s."

While these kids have sparked temporary joy in the diaper and toy industries, their own outlook isn't all that great. Their lives will be highly competitive. Elementary schools are already more crowded than they were 10 years ago. The echo kids, says Foot, "are in the process of recreating some of the problems we saw with the baby boom but in a much more moderate way."

on incredibly well with their parents." The reason is that the teenagers are post-boomers while most of their parents are pre-boomers. Thus, both are members of relatively small "cohort groups" and have a lot in common. The parents include the campus activists, protesters and hippies of the 60s. Today's teenagers are more interested in causes such as the environment than was the last group of teenagers.

The current recession, which slashed the supply of summer jobs in 1991 (and 1992), masked the reality that the outlook for the 15-to-24-year-old group is fabulous. The reason is simply that Canada's maternity wards were underused during the latter part of the 60s and for most of the 70s.

"The law of supply and demand works very well," Foot says. "That's why the price of baby-sitting services is \$5 an hour and rising in Toronto. There's a confidence bordering on arrogance emerging among teenagers that hasn't existed for a long time. They've learned they can earn money and they

degree is going to be worth a lot more in the 90s than it was in 70s and 80s when the job market was flooded with them," says Foot. There will be plenty of affordable accommodation for them as vacancy rates rise during the 90s, so they will leave home earlier than those who came to maturity during the 80s. The only dark cloud on the horizon for these new entrants to the workforce is that their immediate superiors will be the late boomers, whom Foot describes as "a pretty sour bunch." The 21-year-old has had smooth sailing so far but his 29-year-old boss has had a terrible time. These two are an odd couple with very different outlooks on life, and that could lead to trouble.

THE 25-TO-34-YEAR-OLDS

These people picked the worst possible time to be born in this century, the very peak of the baby boom, between 1957 and 1963. "They've had one hell of a life," says Foot, who thinks the late boomers have been unfairly labelled as a selfish "Me Generation" lacking idealism and moral conviction. In fact, they've had no option but to

Information on other age groups on pages 6 to 8