

DO WE EAT OUR



• graphic by Jim Hounslow

YOUNG?

It looks like old people are making big gains at the expense of the young. But who are the real culprits?

by Julia Kuzeljevich

It looks like a vicious generation gap: the oldest Canadians pitted against the youngest over the country's diminishing wealth; greedy seniors driving children into poverty.

A recent Statistics Canada study shows that seniors are gaining in economic security — while more and more young Canadians are being driven into poverty as they receive a smaller and smaller share of the federal till.

"Seniors on the whole are not getting richer, but children as a group are more vulnerable," Statistics Canada analyst Edward Ng said in an interview from his Ottawa office.

Ng received media attention recently by writing a report on the incidence of poverty for seniors and for children. He found that in general, the incidence of low-income for seniors is dropping consistently, but is rising for children.

His report shows that seniors are heavily reliant on government transfer payments such as Old-Age Security, Guaranteed Income Supplements and Spouse's Allowance. These make up 52 per cent of seniors' incomes.

On the other hand, Ng found that less than two per cent of the average income of families came from government transfers such as Family Allowance and Child Tax Credits.

"Children as a group are likely more vulnerable," says Ng, "because their poverty level fluctuates with the economy more directly."

The level of child poverty depends more on the job market and the state of the economy than on specific government allocations. So in difficult economic times like these, it is the youngest Canadians who suffer the most.

Income for seniors from government programs, however, always exists in one form or another — and therefore seniors fare better during times of economic hardship.

The *Globe and Mail* leapt at Ng's report in an article headlined "Seniors gain at expense of young." The article presented the findings as a martial conflict: "The battle would not play itself out between seniors and children, but between the older and younger generations of baby boomers who will battle for government resources to protect retirement income and children."

One angry senior

"The Snowbirds vacationing in Florida are in the minority!"

Andrew Aikens, communications director the Canadian Seniors' Network, reacts angrily to the suggestion that younger Canadians are blaming seniors for their poverty.

He is adamant that seniors deserve what

they receive. "Seniors pay into the Canada Pension Plan and are entitled to the benefits," explains Aikens. "And as the plan is not indexed to inflation, and the income-tax system only partially so, the real value of seniors' incomes and credits erodes."

The trend described by Ng — of wealth consolidating in the baby boomers, the oldest of whom were

born starting in 1945 — actually results in a thinning-out at both ends of the age scale.

In fact, Ng notes, many older Canadians are constantly on the brink of poverty. Seniors' actual income tends to cluster around the poverty line, he says. Should the poverty line rise, seniors' incomes will

quickly fall beneath it.

Poverty experts try not to look at the trend as a reason to pit seniors against young people. There is acknowledgement, though, that seniors' poverty is more widely recognized, and that seniors mobilize more effectively for remedies.

"Seniors are more able to organize around a [united] political process," says Andy Mitchell of the Social Planning Council of Toronto.

Mitchell identifies seniors' poverty as an issue that emerged in the 1970s. The Trudeau government beefed up public pensions in response, and the Guaranteed Income Supplements brought down the rate of poverty.

In 1984 seniors mobilized to stop the Mulroney government cutting the Old Age Security benefits. The government did not cut the benefits, but taxed them back for the higher income bracket.

Children's programs have met a worse fate under Mulroney. Explains Mitchell: "The level of assistance to the young and poor is low in Canada by international standards. Since the mid 1980s, for example, Family Allowance is not universal, and it won't even exist after 1992."

The real culprit

Whoever meets with worse fate, the real culprit appears to be the federal government.

"It's a neo-conservative ideology," says John Clarke of the Ontario Coalition of Poverty, "to say that government resources are scant."

"It is also an offensive argument that 'youth is the future' and that 'seniors' poverty is licked."

"The government would like us to believe that the younger generation's anger is directed at seniors," claims Mike Proc, who is 19 years old and works for the Kensington Youth

Theatre Employment Skills program.

Proc says seniors' interests should not be neglected nor should youths' interests be placed above seniors'. He does not see the situation as an either/or one.

"It's a lie that there isn't enough [money in government] to go around. This is total b.s. I can see bureaucrats who are lobbying for funding in government who might play one group against another. They create antagonism between seniors and the young that does not exist in reality."

Unite to fight the feds

Can young people mobilize to help their own cause? Seemingly not as well as seniors. "We're not recognized as a poverty group because of our inexperience, age and the fact that we are not taken seriously," says Proc.

The May 4 riots on Yonge Street did provoke the government to respond, but Proc feels the response amounts to little more than "tokenistic consulting" and the resulting summer job programs were but "band-aid solutions."

"Calling this an inter-generational conflict is not the way to approach the issue," Social Trends analyst Ng believes. Seniors and young people should not be pitted against each other in a battle for government resources, he adds.

Ng believes that the two groups are interdependent in their goals, that the poverty issue should instead be about "inter-generational solidarity."

Andy Mitchell of the Social Planning Council agrees, but warns that such solidarity won't happen until there is an awareness of poverty at both ends of the age scale.

"There is already a wider recognition of poverty among the elderly, and more devotion to their cause," he notes. "The implications of child poverty are only beginning to seep into public consciousness."