

## Structure

Changes in age structure are a major factor shaping the characteristics of tomorrow's society. In Canada's case; the ageing of its population is accelerating as a necessary consequence of the decline in fertility combined with improvements to health. In this, the Canadian situation is now more similar to that of most other OECD countries. That was not always the case; 20 years ago, for example, the number of persons in Canada aged 65 and over represented about 8 percent of the total population, at the low end of the scale in comparison to other OECD nations. Today, the corresponding figure is about 12 percent, approximately average for the group. Under reasonable assumptions, the proportion of Canadians aged 65 and over will double in the next 35 years or so, to roughly 25 percent of the population, and the proportion of people aged 85 and over will quadruple.

The extent to which this phenomenon will represent a burden on social programs, the capacity of Canadian society to adjust to the challenges involved, and the changes to public policies that may be called for, are all currently subjects of study and debate.

As far as public expenditures are concerned, the impact of the ageing population falls principally on three major social programs: health, education and pensions. Clearly, an analysis of the future "affordability" of these costly programs is beyond the scope of this report. The whole field is immensely complex and strewn with uncertainties. Among the latter are such crucial questions as the policies that may be adopted by federal and provincial governments in response to their fiscal situations, or the assumptions to be applied regarding the trend of female participation in the labour force (which has risen from one third of the male rate in 1960 to nearly four fifths in 1993) and the effect this will exert on dependency ratios. Nevertheless, some authorities (including experts at Statistics Canada) argue that the public costs of an ageing Canadian society may not be the central issue. What may be predicted with some confidence is that significant shifts in the relative costs of social programs will occur. Thus, it is likely that in 50 years education could come to represent only about 20 percent of the expenditures on the three major social programs, as compared to some 40 percent today. This expenditure does not include adult education, training and lifelong learning, which could possibly experience significant growth.

