

## Canadian Demographics

Seniors (those age 65 and over) are one of the fastest growing population groups in Canada, comprising 12% of the total population in the late 1990s compared with 10% in 1981 and 5% in 1921 (Statistics Canada, 1999). They are projected to comprise 23% of the population by 2041 when the baby boom generation (born between 1946 and 1965) begins reaching age 65. Among seniors, those aged 85 and over are the fastest growing age group, almost doubling their numbers between 1981 and 1998. The majority (57%) of seniors are women with this proportion increasing the older one becomes (70% of those aged 85 and older are female). Over one quarter (27%) are immigrants. Most (93%) live at home in a private household and most (68%) live in households headed by a senior. Ninety percent of these senior homeowners have paid off their mortgage. Most (57%) live with their spouse; 7% live with members of their extended family; 29% live on their own; and 7% live in a long-term care institution.

The current cohort of seniors has relatively low levels of formal education with only 8% having a university degree, 25% attending but not graduating from high school; and 37% with less than a Grade 9 education. Partly because of this, over half (53%) are able to perform only simple reading tasks such as locating one piece of information in a text. Few senior households are connected to the internet with only 4% of households headed by a senior linking in compared with 15% of younger adult households. Most Canadian seniors are retired, but 6% are working in the paid labour force. Approximately one quarter (23%)\* though, participate in formal volunteer activities. Even more (80%) make at least one donation to a charity, more than any other age group. Television viewing is a favourite activity among seniors with people age 60 and over watching, on average, 4.9 hours per day, almost two hours more than those between ages 18-59. News and public affairs account for the largest share of television viewing, over two hours per day. Canadian seniors are almost as active as younger age groups with 50% engaged in regular physical activity and 12% occasionally taking part in such activity.

In 1997, 19% of Canadian seniors had incomes below Statistics Canada's low income cutoff. This was a drop from 1980 when it was 34%. Among unattached seniors, women are much more likely to have low income, with 49% in the low income category. While most seniors report their overall health is relatively good, 82% of those living at home have been diagnosed with at least one chronic condition, with arthritis and rheumatism the most common chronic health problem; 28% of these seniors report some level of restriction in their activities because of a long-term health problem; and 25% of seniors living at home have a long-term disability or handicap. Seniors are heavy users of hospitals, with three times more hospitalizations than people aged 45-64. The majority of seniors (84%) take some form of prescription or over-the-counter medication. Pain relievers are the most commonly used drug.

That is, Canadian seniors, by and large, are married and living with their spouse or they live on their own. Few live with children or with other family members. Most are not working in paid labour; a quarter are engaged in formal volunteer activities. The poverty rate is decreasing\*\* but among unattached seniors, women are particularly vulnerable. Canadian seniors view their overall health as good given their age but are heavy users of hospitals and of medications.

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\* Figures just released reveal this has dropped to 18% (consistent with a drop in volunteering generally).

\*\* Poverty rates are effected by the definitions used. The official definition changed during the time period discussed here, contributing to the decrease.