

## Canada's aging Boomers place new strain on pensions, health care: Census

MARK KENNEDY, POSTMEDIA NEWS | May 29, 2012 8:56 AM ET | Last Updated: May 29, 2012

OTTAWA — Look to your left and look to your right, Canada. Get used to what you see. More grey hair, and more Canadians living in retirement. Canada is slowly but surely becoming a nation of older people.

The demographic trends were confirmed Tuesday, as Statistics Canada released the latest batch of data from its 2011 census.

Back in 1971, eight per cent of us were 65 and older.

Last year, as the first wave of baby boomers reached the milestone, the proportion was 14.8 per cent. That's nearly 5 million seniors (4,945,060, to be exact) out of 33.5 million Canadians.

There were 5,825 Canadians who have reached their 100th birthday — centenarians — and the number is projected to steadily rise to a whopping 78,300 in the next 50 years.

All the while — and here's a surprise — there's a mini-baby boom happening in this country. The population of children aged four and under increased 11 per cent between 2006 and 2011 — the highest growth rate for this age group since the late 1950s and early 1960s.

But make no mistake — even this development won't stop the inevitable change to the face of Canada where, within two decades, it's expected that 22.8 per cent of us will be 65 and older.

Consider this: In 1961, when the baby boom hit its peak, 34 per cent of the Canadian population was aged 14 and under. (School construction was the order of the day). By last year, that share dropped to 16.7 per cent.

Another way of looking at the change? In 1961, the median age in Canada was 26.3. By last year, it had risen to 40.6.

Finally, another set of numbers: After the First World War, in 1921, Canada was a young country in both its history and people. Only 4.8 per cent of the population was 65 and older, compared to 14.8 per cent last year.

Indeed, the statistics show that as baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1965) now enter their senior years, profound and often controversial questions are being raised about whether Canada is ready for the possible consequences to a declining labour force, and the increasing costs of the health care and pension systems.

Demographic experts and researchers who have studied aging populations internationally agree that Canada must now confront what lies ahead, although there is a lively debate over whether the aging population will, as some predict, lead to skyrocketing social program costs.

“I think some changes are going to be needed,” said Elaine Gallagher, director of the University of Victoria’s Centre on Aging. “But we have time to make those changes. It’s not a tsunami. It’s not going to happen overnight. It will happen slowly over the next 30 years and we’ve got time to plan for it, to adjust.”

She said the changes are both practical and necessary: building code changes to require reinforced walls behind the shower to build a handrail; wider doors for wheelchairs; better public transit for seniors; longer lights at crosswalks, where seniors on foot are increasingly falling; and enhanced homecare programs, including assistance to help seniors with their yard work and house-cleaning so they can stay in their homes.

“We really didn’t design cities for the elderly,” she said.

“We designed them for able-bodied people, 35-year-old engineers who bicycle to work. A good deal of retrofitting is going to be needed.”

The census results come just months after Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared that his government will make major “transformations” to prepare for the demographic changes that he said threaten this country’s economic future.

Among the controversial policy changes now underway: future Old Age Security pension system costs are being curtailed by making seniors wait until 67 to get their benefits; health-care transfers to provinces are being cut back; immigration rules are being changed to get more skilled workers into the labor force.

The latest census data shows a looming wave of Canadians approaching retirement. Among the “working-age” group, a record 42.4 per cent were between 45 and 64, compared to 28.6 per cent two decades ago.

## CENSUS HIGHLIGHTS

- Number of seniors (age 65 and over) is nearly 5 million
- The number of seniors is at the highest rate ever in Canada
- The working-age population, aged 15-64, only grew by 5.7 per cent and account for 42 per cent of the total population
- The population of children under 14 only grew by 0.5 per cent
- The population of children under 4 increased a lot, by 11 per cent between 2006 and 2011
- The first baby boomers hit retirement age — 65 — in 2011
- The fastest-growing age group are 60-64 year-olds, at 29 per cent
- The second fastest-growing group are centenarians, those over 100.
- Saskatchewan had the highest fertility rate of all the provinces
- The working age population in Alberta encompasses 70 per cent of the overall population
- The oldest CAs — cities — are Parksville, B.C., Elliot Lake, Ont., and Cobourg, Ont
- Cities with the highest proportion of working age population are: Wood Buffalo, Alta., Yellowknife, Strathmore, Alta., and Whitehorse
- 5,825 Canadians are over 100 years old
- There are 500 women centenarians for every 100 men
- Saskatchewan has the highest rate of centenarians of all the provinces and territories
- The Calgary CMA has an equal gender split, 50-50
- Wood Buffalo, Alta., is the manliest town in Canada, with 54.4 per cent of the overall population
- Cobourg, Ont., is where the ladies are. It is the city under 100,000 with largest proportion of women, 53.6 per cent
- Nunavut is the youngest territory or province, with 32 per cent of the population under 14
- The median age in Canada in May 2011 was 40.6
- The number of children aged four and under increased for the first time in 50 years
- Nearly two-thirds of all teenagers live in central Canada