

Latest census reveals good and bad news about our aging population

Some census results may seem surprising given the dire news we often hear about seniors

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A senior jumps into British Columbia's Slokan Lake. The latest information from Statistics Canada contains some surprising data about seniors.
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As Statistics Canada rolls out its latest information about Canada's population, I wondered what they found in the older person category.

I wanted to know how the average senior fares in our society and what roles older people play in the community. As well, I wondered if they can navigate safely in our society and whether they are disproportionately affected by abuse or by world events such as climate change and COVID-19 and its variants.

Some of what I found may surprise you given the often-dire news we hear about seniors who are negatively affected by dismal health care situations, severe climate change events (remember the heat dome which adversely impacted so many seniors in B.C.), more and more scams perpetrated against seniors and so on. It seems there is a mix of information from StatCan, and corroborated by others, that there is both good and bad news relative to an older Canadian.

According to the StatCan web pages, the population of older people has increased. It was found that there are seven million people aged 65 and older, which represents nearly one in five Canadians (19 per cent), up from 16.9 per cent in 2016.

Significantly, as well, older people are living longer. A fun fact, as of July 1, 2021, it was recorded that there are 12,822 centenarians in Canada — a 16-per-cent increase from 2016. StatCan also found that “Seniors aged 85 and older are growing in number and as a proportion of the population. The growth of this population will accelerate even further in coming years, as the first baby boomer cohorts will turn 85.” The baby boomers like me, born between 1946 and 1965, are the largest generation in Canadian history.

It is important to note that the growth in this population will have wide implications for government and policymakers, especially around health, housing, long-term care and management of severe climate changes.

As well as an increased life expectancy, older people are leading more active lives. People are better off economically, stay involved in community longer and for the most part are healthier. However, the StatCan report says, “As more seniors are living to 85 and beyond, an increasing number of individuals will face limitations and long-term health challenges.”

On the StatCan web pages, it was found that older people supply much of the caregiving for their aging family and friends. Supporting this fact, the Canadian Association of Retired People says “This unpaid labour estimated at \$25-billion annually is being shouldered by millions of Canadians, over one million of whom are over age 65.”

Many seniors said they felt safe in community despite some increases in elder abuse and scams targeting older people. A report by Shana Conroy and Danielle Sutton, Canadian Centre for Justice, and Community Safety Statistics says, “Most seniors were somewhat or very satisfied with their personal safety from crime (82 per cent), perceived their neighbourhood as having a lower amount of crime than other areas in Canada (77 per cent) and reported a somewhat or very strong sense of community belonging (72 per cent).”

Older people are working longer, many up to the retirement age of 65 and some beyond that cut off. StatCan says, “Compared with two decades ago, more seniors remained active in the labour market in their late 60s and into their 70s. Seniors with a bachelor’s degree or higher and those without private retirement income were more likely to work than other seniors.” Men were more likely than women to continue to work. Possibly because many women leave the work force to take on the caregiving role in their families.

StatCan says that “although COVID-19 has affected all Canadians, seniors are particularly vulnerable to its health impacts, including a higher risk of hospitalization, health complications, and death.” They also say as seniors are more likely to live alone or in an institution, that health measures meant to keep older people safe paradoxically put them at risk of social isolation which is arguably a severe and critical issue for seniors.

While the pandemic seems to be evolving with new variants abounding, maybe it would be wise for older people to continue practising safety measures like wearing masks in indoor settings, distancing from people in public spaces and keeping up their vaccination regime.

However, despite being negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the over-65 population continues to increase in Canada as a whole. I think that we need to prepare for the issues for older people that this growth will create.

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