

Chapter 5

Demography

Demography is that branch of science which deals with the growth, distribution, density, characteristics, vital statistics, migration, etc., of human population – in short, the life conditions of people. The present chapter is concerned with this subject as it applies to the population of Canada. It differs from previous editions of the Canada Year Book in bringing together in one chapter these various demographic elements. The subject is treated by providing first a brief picture of population growth in Canada, and then a summary of the most recent data from the 1971 Census on the distribution and demographic characteristics of the population, households and families (Sections 5.1 to 5.4). A second major part of the chapter is concerned with the vital processes (fertility, mortality, nuptiality) which play such a major role in shaping population trends and composition (Sections 5.5 to 5.8). Finally, there are the migration factors (immigration and emigration) which also have a significant influence on population change and structure (Section 5.9).

5.1 Population growth

The most fundamental fact about a population is its rate of growth which affects almost every aspect of the national life. The opening up of a new continent and the gradual evolution of an industrial and urban economy form the historical background for population growth in Canada. Several demographic elements have combined to produce this growth: births, deaths, immigration and emigration, which are the processes, or components, of population change.

5.1.1 The early period

The growth of Canada's population today is the culmination of a trend which began around the early 17th century with the arrival of the first French settlers. From this beginning, the population of the area now known as Canada (excluding Newfoundland) grew from a handful of colonists and an unknown number of native Indians and Eskimos in 1611 to about 2.4 million in 1851 and 3.7 million at the first Census of Canada in 1871. Rough estimates indicate there were about 136,000 Indians in 1851.

Growth rates in the early settlement years were very irregular; the immigrant population grew rapidly while the native population remained almost stationary or declined as a result of attrition from warfare and disease. Between 1681, when the number of settlers passed the 10,000 mark, and 1851 the average annual growth rate of the non-native population in each decade varied between 1.6% and 4.5%; the average annual growth rate for the whole period was 3.2%. The small size of the initial population and the continuous expansion into empty lands were contributing factors in the rapid growth rates in the early periods.

The decade 1851-61 was one of surging growth, second only to the growth rate in the first decade of the present century (Table 5.1). The average annual growth rate during this period was 2.9%, with about 23% of the total population increase due to net migration; over 350,000 immigrants arrived and there was very little emigration. A long period of slow growth followed and lasted to the beginning of the 20th century. Between 1861 and 1901 the average growth rate was closer to 1%, matched only by the rate during the depression period of the 1930s. This slow growth toward the end of the last century was due to heavy emigration resulting in a net migration loss (Table 5.2). Emigrants included elements of both the Canadian and foreign-born populations. While many immigrants continued to come to Canada during this period a large number of them re-emigrated to the United States where prospective settlers were offered more favourable economic and climatic conditions. The westward movement in the United States attracted not only settlers from every part of that country, but from Canada as well.

5.1.2 Recent trends

The beginning of the present century witnessed a flood of immigrants which helped to raise the growth rate to 3.0% per annum during 1901-11, the highest rate recorded since 1851. Over 1.5 million immigrants entered Canada in this decade, as many as had arrived during the previous 40 years. As a result, over 44% of the total population increase during this period was due to migration gain.