

DEMOGRAPHY

2.1 Population growth

The most fundamental information about a population is its rate of growth which affects almost every aspect of the national life. Several demographic elements combine to produce this rate: births, deaths, immigration and emigration.

Canada's population was over 24.3 million on June 3, 1981, the date of the 1981 Census. This was an increase of 12.9% over the previous decade, a period of relatively slow growth. The only decade in the current century with a lower rate of growth was from 1931 to 1941, when the population increased by only 10.9%. However, compared to other Western nations, Canada was still experiencing a healthy growth rate. From 1970 to 1980, the United States grew by 11.4%. From 1971 to 1981, Britain grew by only 0.3% and France by 5.3%.

By November 1983 the population of Canada had risen to about 25.0 million, according to Statistics Canada estimates.

2.2 Future prospects

The dominant component of population growth in Canada since 1851 has been natural increase (births minus deaths). Although this trend is likely to continue for some time, migration assumed an increasingly important role as the rate of natural increase declined. The birth rate will continue to be a dynamic and crucial factor of growth. Moreover, fluctuations in birth rates can create major economic and social problems. For example, although the post-war baby boom is long past, society is now feeling the impact of this generation on the labour market and other aspects of the national economy. Similarly, problems associated with the sharp drop in the birth rate since 1957 are being felt by school systems as fewer children enter school.

The tempo of future growth depends mainly on whether the total fertility rate, which is now below the replacement level of 2.1 births, will remain constant, fall or rise.

Because of the decline in the number of children in Canada, young adults will not be totally replaced numerically by the next generation unless by increased immigration. These data hold implications for consumer demand in the areas of housing and many other goods and services.

Predictions are subject to error but a period of low fertility is generally seen as the most likely possibility in the immediate future. The birth rate may show some fluctuation, but is not expected to vary a great deal from the replacement level.

Effects related to the bulge in the population caused by the post-war baby boom will continue to dominate Canada's social structure.

Now in their late 20s and 30s, this group will soon constitute a fairly large body of older workers. On retirement, they will necessitate changes in pension systems as the balance between working and non-working populations is altered. Similarly, there may be consequences for health care services, housing and other special requirements of the elderly.

Another dimension of Canada's population structure is the preponderance of women among people 65 years of age and older. This imbalance can be expected to grow in the years to come with the increased aging of the population because the gap between female longevity to 76 years and male longevity to 69 continues to widen. Besides, many elderly women are in the low-income category. There are policy implications both because the numbers are growing significantly and because many elderly women are economically disadvantaged and socially isolated.

The effects of Canada's changing age structure are reflected in much of the 1981 Census data. The decreasing number of children and the increasing number of elderly people, many of whom live alone, have contributed to an overall decline in the average number of persons in each household from 3.5 in 1971 to 2.9 in 1981. The growing number of elderly people, along with an increasing incidence of divorce and of young people choosing to live alone for some years after leaving the parental home, have contributed to a rate of increase in the number of households almost three times as great as the population growth.

2.3 Taking the census

Decennial census. The most recent general census of population was taken on June 3, 1981. The basic legal reason for the decennial census is to enable a redistribution of seats in the House of Commons.