

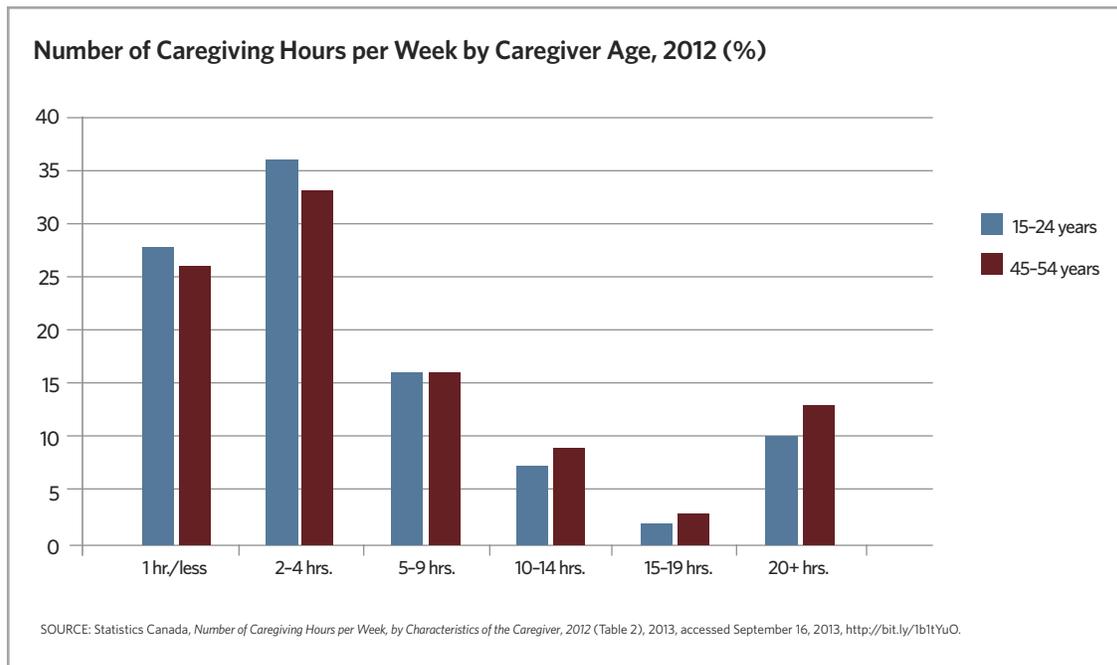
FASCINATING FAMILIES

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Young Caregivers in Canada

BY NATHAN BATTAMS



Caregivers play an important role in securing and maintaining the health and well-being of Canadians living with chronic health conditions, aging-associated needs, injuries or disabilities. Their work not only helps care recipients, but also relieves the pressure and costs facing their families and the health care system. Despite their growing importance for an aging population, the caregiving contributions of Canadian youth have been largely overlooked until recent years. The 2012 General Social Survey (GSS) on Caregiving and Care Receiving, however, has shed some light on this indispensable group of health providers.

In 2012, there were 8.1 million Canadians providing care to a chronically ill, disabled or aging family member or friend at some point in the year prior to the

survey – representing more than one-quarter (28%) of the total population aged 15 and older.¹ While 45- to 55-year-olds were the most likely age group to be caregivers (24%), there were 1.25 million caregivers aged 15-24, accounting for 15% of the total group.² Further age breakdowns from this report are unavailable, but in a recent survey of 12- to 17-year-old high school students in British Columbia, 12% of respondents self-identified as caregivers.³

As with other caregivers, young carers were most likely to be helping family members: 48% of the recipients of young caregivers' help were grandparents, 25% were parents, 15% were friends, colleagues or neighbours, and 13% were in-laws or other family members.⁴ Services provided were diverse, ranging

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from daily activities such as meal preparation and bathing to relatively infrequent tasks such as providing travel to a medical appointment or yardwork.

Far from simply being “helpers,” young carers devoted a similar amount of time to their work as their 45- to 54-year-old counterparts (the most common caregiver age group). Among 15- to 24-year-olds, 28% provided caregiving for an hour or less per week, 36% for two to four hours, 16% for five to nine hours and 10% for 20 or more hours – compared to 26%, 33%, 16% and 13%, respectively, for 45- to 54-year-olds (see chart).⁵

Studies have shown that caregiving can have many beneficial effects for young people, particularly when their efforts are adequately supported. Many young caregivers experience a great deal of pride in their work, exhibit heightened empathy and have heightened maturity and confidence. These carers also tend to experience a strong sense of attachment to the care recipient, which can foster and strengthen connections between generations.⁶

However, caregiving can also have certain negative outcomes for Canadian youth. Adolescents and young adults already face high levels of anxiety and stress, as many are exploring new social spheres, entering the labour market for the first time, trying to plan for their futures or have started their post-secondary education.

When in unsupported or adverse caregiving situations, it can be all the harder for these young

Canadians to balance their personal development with caregiving responsibilities. Negative outcomes can include significant time away from friends and school, social isolation and heightened stress levels.⁷ These outcomes can go on to affect other aspects of their lives, including school retention, entry into post-secondary education and training, employment, health and well-being.⁸

Family Lens

The contributions of young caregivers in Canada are extremely important, not only to those receiving the care, but to society as a whole. They fill in “caregiving gaps” that can result when adult carers don’t have enough time to fulfill their primary caregiving responsibilities. But they aren’t just “helping out”: they are caregivers in their own right, worthy of full recognition for their hard work and sacrifice.

Young carers’ work helps family members living with chronic health conditions, aging-associated needs, injuries or disabilities to remain at home instead of in institutionalized care settings. It is important that teachers, guidance counsellors, principals, employers and home care workers support the efforts of young carers, as greater support validates their experiences and helps to foster positive outcomes.⁹

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¹ Maire Sinha, “Portrait of Caregivers, 2012,” *Spotlight on Canadians: Results from the General Social Survey*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-652-X (September 2013), accessed September 13, 2013, <http://bit.ly/15OfaJ2>.

² Ibid.

³ G. Charles, S. Marshall and T. Stainton, “An Overview of the Demographics, Profiles and Initial Results from the British Columbia Young Carers Project,” *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice* 23, no. 4 (2010), accessed September 24, 2013, <http://bit.ly/17Vv1Mg>.

⁴ Martin Turcotte, “Main Recipient of Care, by Caregiver’s Age, 2012” (Chart 2), *Family Caregiving: What Are the Consequences?* Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-006-XWE (September 2013), <http://bit.ly/15XVvky>.

⁵ Maire Sinha, “Number of Caregiving Hours per Week, by Characteristics of the Caregiver, 2012” (Table 2), *Portrait of Caregivers*, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1btYuO>.

⁶ G. Charles, T. Stainton and S. Marshall, “Young Carers: Mature Before Their Time,” *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 18, no. 2 (2009), accessed September 13, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1eM2idk>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Action Canada, *Who Cares About Young Carers? An Action Canada Task Force Report*, 2013, accessed October 18, 2013, <http://bit.ly/H5qLhD>.

⁹ Ibid.

