

# Grandparent Health and Family Well-Being

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## Life expectancy increases fuel grandparent population aging

One of the underlying factors fuelling the aging of the grandparent population is the fact that Canadians are *living longer*. According to Statistics Canada, *life expectancy at birth* has continued to rise steadily, reaching 83.8 years for women and 79.6 years for men in 2011–2013.<sup>6</sup> This represents an increase of about a decade over the past half-century, with women and men gaining 9.5 years and 11.2 years, respectively, since the years 1960–1962.

In addition, more people are reaching seniorhood than in the past because of mortality declines at ages below age 65. Data from Statistics Canada shows that the average share of *female* newborns who can expect to reach age 65 rose from 86% for those born in 1980–1982 to 92% for those born in 2011–2013, while this share increased from 75% to 87% for *males* during the same period.<sup>7</sup>



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***Delayed fertility contributes to the aging of the grandparent population since it increases the age of transitioning into grandparenthood.***

delayed fertility for education and work experience. Their children are also having children later, and the fertility postponement of *two generations together* is influencing the pattern of later entry into grandparenthood.

Despite the aging of grandparents, grandparenthood accounts for a growing portion of many people's lives. Even though people are becoming grandparents later, they are living longer as grandparents. The longer period of time spent in the grandparent role can extend opportunities for forming, nurturing and strengthening relationships with younger generations. According to my recent research, the average number of years that someone can expect to spend as a grandparent given today's demography in Canada is 24.3 years for women and 18.9 years for men<sup>12</sup> – that's approximately two decades in which they can continue to play a major role in family life.

## Despite being older, grandparents are healthier

In addition to living longer, data from the General Social Survey (GSS) suggest that grandparents in Canada today are far more likely to report *living in good health* than in the past. The proportion who rate their health as "good/very good/excellent" has increased from 70% in 1985 to 77% in 2011, while the share reporting "fair/poor" health has fallen from 31% to 23%. Overall, the odds of grandparents reporting that they are in good health are 44% higher in 2011 than in 1985.<sup>13</sup>

People are also *living longer as seniors*, as reflected in ongoing increases in *life expectancy at age 65* – a useful measure of the well-being of older populations since it excludes mortality for those who do not reach seniorhood. According to estimates from Statistics Canada, life expectancy at age 65 in 2011–2013 was 21.9 years for women and 19 years for men – up by 3 years and 4.4 years, respectively, from 1980 to 1982.<sup>8</sup>

Another contributing factor to the aging of grandparents is the fact that on average, women are having children at older ages than in the past – a fertility trend that *increases the age of transitioning into grandparenthood*. The average age of first-time mothers has risen steadily since 1970, from 23.7 to 28.8 years in 2013.<sup>9,10</sup> The number of first-time mothers *aged 40 and older* has also grown, rising from 1,172 in 1993 to 3,648 in 2013 (+210%).<sup>11</sup> As more women postpone childbearing until later in life, their transition to grandparenthood will also likely occur later. Today's new grandparents are baby boomers, a generation in which many women

A number of trends have contributed to health improvements among grandparents and older Canadians in general over the past half-century. There have been significant advances in public health that have facilitated disease prevention, detection and treatment. Among other factors, this has led to major reductions in deaths from circulatory system diseases (e.g. heart disease), which has been one of the biggest contributors to gains in life expectancy among men over the past half-century.<sup>14</sup>

Another factor contributing to improvements in the health of grandparents in Canada is the *rising educational attainment* of this population.<sup>15</sup> Research shows that education can improve health both in direct and indirect ways throughout life. *Direct* impacts can include enhancing one's health literacy, knowledge, interactions with the health care system and patients' ability and willingness to advocate for themselves when engaging with health care providers. *Indirect* impacts can include an increase in one's resources (e.g. income) or occupational opportunities (e.g. being less likely to have a physically demanding and/or risky job, and more likely to have a job with health benefits).<sup>16</sup>

These are important factors to consider in the Canadian context, since the share of grandparents who have completed post-secondary education has *more than tripled* over the past three decades, from 13% in 1985 to nearly 40% by 2011.<sup>17</sup>



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*Education has been associated with greater health, which is significant because the share of grandparents who have completed post-secondary education has more than tripled over the past three decades.*

### **Healthy grandparents can facilitate family well-being**

Grandparent health can have a significant impact on families. When a grandparent (or multiple grandparents) is living in *poor health*, families are often the first to provide, manage or pay for care that supports their well-being. This is particularly true for senior grandparents receiving care at home; the Health Council of Canada estimates that families provide between 70% and 75% of *all* home care received by seniors in Canada.<sup>18</sup>

Data from the 2012 GSS show that nearly 3 in 10 Canadians (28%) reported providing caregiving to a family member in the past year, and aging-related needs were the most commonly cited reason for care (reported by 28% of caregivers). Grandparents accounted for 13% of all Canadians who received care, and they were also the most frequent recipients of young caregivers' (aged 15 to 29) assistance, 4 in 10 of whom cited a grandparent as the primary recipient.<sup>19</sup>

While 95% of caregivers say they're effectively coping with their caregiving responsibilities, research has found that in some contexts, it can have a negative impact on their well-being, career development and family finances.<sup>20</sup> This can be particularly true for the three-quarters of caregivers who are also in the paid labour force, accounting for more than one-third of *all* working Canadians.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, when grandparents are living in *good health*, families can benefit in a variety of ways. In addition to the fact that it means they are less likely to require caregiving assistance, they are also more likely to be able to make *positive* contributions to family life, such as providing child care and contributing to family finances.

## Grandparents provide child care to younger generations

Many grandparents play an important role in caring for their grandchildren, which can help parents in the “middle generation” manage their child care and paid work responsibilities. A number of economic, social and environmental trends have converged in recent decades that have increased the significant contributions they make to families with regard to child care.

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Over the past four decades, the share of *dual-earner couples* in Canada has increased; in 1976, 36% of couples with children included two earners, a rate that nearly doubled to 69% by 2014. In more than half of these couples (51%), both parents worked *full-time*,<sup>22</sup> which means they were more likely to rely on non-parental care for their children. This is supported by data from the 2011 GSS: while nearly half (46%) of all parents reported relying on some type of child care for their children aged 14 years and younger in the past year, the rate was higher (71%) for dual-earner parents with children aged 0 to 4 and children aged 5 to 14 (49%).

The *evolution in family structure and composition* across generations has also contributed to more families relying on non-parental care for their children. The share of *lone-parent families* has increased significantly over the past 50 years, rising from 8.4% of all families in 1961 to approximately 16% in 2016.<sup>23</sup> Data from the 2011 GSS show that nearly 6 in 10 lone parents of children aged 4 and under (58%) report that they rely on non-parental care.

Sometimes grandparents are *solely* responsible for raising their grandchildren when no middle (i.e. parent) generation is present. The 2011 GSS counted 51,000 of these “skip-generation families” in Canada, which was home to 12% of all grandparents who live with their grandchildren.<sup>24</sup> Some of those who live with their children are more likely than others to live in skip-generation homes, such as people reporting a First Nations (28%), Métis (28%) or Inuit (18%) identity (compared with 11% among the non-Indigenous population).<sup>25</sup>



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Lastly, many parents may rely on grandparents for help with child care if they can't find quality, regulated child care spaces in their communities. In 2014, the availability in regulated, centre-based child care spaces was only sufficient for one-quarter (24%) of children aged 5 and under across Canada.<sup>26</sup> While this is a significant increase from 12% in 1992, it still leaves more than 3 in 4 children in this age group without an available regulated child care space. The availability of child care (or a lack thereof) is significant, since it can affect whether or not parents in coupled families can both participate in the paid labour market.

The *cost of child care* can also lead parents to turn to grandparents for child care assistance. This is particularly true for families living in urban centres.

One 2015 study on the cost of child care in Canadian cities, which used administrative fee data and randomized phone surveys conducted with child care centres and homes, found that the highest rates in Canada were in Toronto, where estimates showed median unsubsidized rates of \$1,736 *per month* for full-day infant care (under 18 months of age) and \$1,325 for toddlers (aged 1½ to 3).<sup>27</sup>

## Grandparent involvement can enhance child well-being

Regardless of the *reason* grandparents spend time with their grandchildren, their involvement in family life can benefit the well-being of children. Studies have shown that grandparent involvement in family life is significantly associated with child well-being<sup>28</sup> – in particular, it has been associated with greater prosocial behaviours and school involvement.<sup>29</sup> The benefits aren't limited to children, either, as other research has shown that close relationships between grandparents and grandchildren can have a positive impact on mental health for *both*.<sup>30</sup> Among First Nations families, grandparents have also been found to play an important role in supporting cultural health and healing among younger generations.<sup>31</sup>

The broader context of improving grandparent health is good news for many families, since their better health can make it easier to participate in activities with children and grandchildren, and research shows that these interactions with younger kin can be more rewarding in this context.<sup>32, 33</sup>



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*Research shows that grandparent involvement in family life is significantly associated with child well-being, including greater prosocial behaviours and school involvement.*

## Many grandparents play an important role in family finances

Improvements in grandparent health can also enhance their capacity to engage in *paid work*, which can improve their own finances and facilitate contributions to younger generations.

While there isn't much recent data on the employment patterns of *grandparents* in Canada per se, rising rates of *working seniors* have been well documented over the past several decades. Between 1997 and 2003, the paid labour force participation rate for seniors ranged between 6% and 7%, but this has steadily increased to around 14% in the first half of 2017 (and an even higher rate of 27% for those aged 65 to 69).<sup>34</sup> Since approximately 8 in 10 seniors in Canada are grandparents,<sup>35, 36</sup> it's clear that a growing number of grandparents are working today.

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The potential for grandparents to contribute to family finances through paid work can be particularly important for the 8% who live in *multi-generational households*.<sup>37</sup> According to data from the 2016 Census, this is the fastest-growing household type, having grown in number by nearly 38% between 2011 and 2016 to reach 403,810 homes.<sup>38</sup> Similar to patterns found among skip-generation families, this living arrangement is more common among Indigenous and immigrant families, which both represent a growing share of families in Canada.

Data from the 2011 GSS showed that among the 584,000 grandparents living in these types of homes, more than half (50.3%) reported that they have financial responsibilities in the household. Some were more likely than others to contribute to family finances: rates were significantly higher for those living in skip-generation households (80%) and multi-generational households with a lone-parent middle generation (75%).<sup>39</sup>

## Opportunities are growing for grandparent-family relationships



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While the aging of the general and grandparent population in Canada presents certain societal challenges, notably with regard to community care, housing, transportation and income security, their rising life expectancy and improving health present growing opportunities for individuals and families. Many grandparents already help younger generations with fulfilling family responsibilities, such as child care and managing family finances, and this will continue in the years ahead – a positive side of the story that is often lost in narratives about the “grey tsunami.”

As the health of grandparents has improved over the years, many have been able to enjoy a greater quantity and quality of relationships with younger family

members. As families adapt and react to their evolving social, economic and cultural contexts, they will continue to play an important – and likely growing – role in family life for generations to come.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>18</sup> Health Council of Canada, *Seniors in Need, Caregivers in Distress: What Are the Home Care Priorities for Seniors in Canada?* (March 2012). [Link: http://bit.ly/2wFqAwG](http://bit.ly/2wFqAwG).

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