

Almost one-quarter of Canadian seniors are caregivers

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While older Canadians may be more likely than their younger counterparts to require help and care in their daily lives, almost one-quarter of Canadian seniors aged 65 years and older are caregivers themselves. And while the roles and responsibilities of these senior caregivers may have changed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges they face could be heightened.

Although the pandemic has affected the lives of all Canadians, seniors have been identified as a population particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Not only are seniors more at risk of severe illness, they are also more affected by isolation measures. As a result, many senior caregivers who help people living outside of their household may not have been able to provide the same level of care that they usually do. Senior caregivers providing help to their spouse may also have seen their burden of care increase, given the possible lack of other support during the pandemic. For example, older caregivers who are usually supported by their adult children to provide help and care for their spouses, may have had to perform additional activities and provide more hours of care than usual. While the data in the current study were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the results highlight the many challenges senior caregivers already faced.

A new study, "[The experiences and needs of older caregivers in Canada](#)," uses data from the 2018 General Social Survey on Caregiving and Care Receiving to provide a profile of senior caregivers in Canada. Senior caregivers are those who have provided help or care to a spouse, another family member, or a friend with a long-term health condition, a physical or mental disability, or problems related to aging.

Senior caregivers are likely to continue to play an important role in the years to come. As the needs for care and help increase with an aging population, smaller families and geographic mobility among Canadians may reduce the supply of potential younger family caregivers. Within this context, many older Canadians may be relied upon to become care providers, even though they may develop health issues of their own, including age-related physical and cognitive declines, chronic illness and some level of disability.

Senior men are as likely to be caregivers as senior women, but they provide fewer hours of care on average

In 2018, 1.5 million of the 7.8 million Canadian caregivers were aged 65 years and older. This means that almost one-quarter of Canadians aged 65 years and older (24%) were caregivers in 2018, which is similar to the proportion of caregivers amongst all Canadians aged 15 years and older (25%).

Unlike younger caregivers, older senior men were as likely to be caregivers as senior women. Among seniors aged 75 to 84, for example, men (22%) and women (23%) were equally likely to have caregiving responsibilities. And among Canadians aged 85 and older, men (17%) were, in fact, more likely to be caregivers than women (11%). In comparison, women aged 45 to 54 (37%) were more likely to provide care than men of the same age (29%).

As in younger age groups, senior women caregivers still assumed more of the burden in terms of the number of hours of care. Overall, senior women caregivers spent a median of 8 hours providing care or support to family and friends in 2018, compared with 5 hours for senior men.

Seniors most likely to provide care for a spouse

Across the life cycle, the relationship between the caregiver and the primary care receiver changes. As people age, they are less and less likely to care primarily for their parents, and more and more likely to care for their spouse.



In 2018, about one-third (34%) of all senior caregivers aged 65 and older provided care primarily for their spouse. This was followed by caring for a friend, colleague or neighbour (20%), their own parents (17%), other family members (14%), their children (9%) and parents-in-law (6%). In comparison, 8% of caregivers aged 45 to 54 provided care for a spouse and most were providing care to a parent (53%) or to a parent-in-law (11%).

Caring for a spouse is also associated with more hours of care. For example, in 2018, senior caregivers spent a median of 6 hours per week providing care or support to family and friends. In comparison, they spent a median of 20 hours per week providing care to a spouse.

Senior women are more likely to help with medical treatments and to provide personal care

Similar to what is observed in the rest of the caregiver population, senior caregivers' activities are divided along gender lines. For example, among senior caregivers, men were more likely than women to participate in house maintenance/outdoor work (47% versus 29%), while women were more likely than men to participate in household work activities such as meal preparation, house cleaning or laundry (56% versus 47%).

Senior women were also more likely to participate in caregiving activities that often need to be completed on a regular basis or set schedule, such as helping with medical treatments (32% versus 23%), providing personal care (such as bathing or cutting nails) (37% versus 24%), as well as scheduling and coordinating appointments for the care receiver (48% versus 33%).

More than one-quarter of senior caregivers reported overall health had suffered because of caregiving

Despite the many rewards of being a caregiver, caregiving often has an impact on a person's physical and mental health. In 2018, one-third of senior caregivers reported that their caregiving responsibilities were stressful or very stressful.

In addition to the stress of caregiving responsibilities, over one-quarter (27%) of senior caregivers reported that their overall health had suffered because of caregiving responsibilities.

The impact on health and stress related to caregiving varied significantly depending on the number of hours spent on caregiving, and had a stronger effect on senior women. For example, among senior women who provided less than 10 hours of care per week, 17% reported that their overall health suffered because of their caregiving responsibilities. This proportion rose to 31% for women who provided from 10 to 19 hours of care and close to half (46%) of those who provided 20 hours or more.

Senior caregivers report unmet caregiving needs

Although many caregivers receive support from various sources, not all caregivers received the support and assistance they needed. Caregivers' unmet support needs are associated with lower life satisfaction, more daily stress and worse self-reported mental health.

In 2018, caregivers who reported that they had unmet needs were asked about the specific types of support they would have liked to have received to help with their caregiving duties.

More than half (56%) of senior caregivers reported they would have liked to have received financial support, government assistance or tax credit. The next most common types of unmet support needs were home care or support (45%), information or advice (33%) or help from medical professionals (29%). These types of unmet support were similar to those in other age groups and highlight the fact that senior caregivers also require additional support.

Note to readers

This article is based on data from the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS) – Caregiving and Care Receiving. The target population for the 2018 GSS is all non-institutionalized persons aged 15 and older living in the provinces.

Caregivers were defined as respondents who reported that, in the previous 12 months, they had either (a) cared for or helped someone who had a long-term health condition or a physical or mental disability, or (b) cared for or helped someone who had problems related to aging.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [4502](#).

The article "[The experiences and needs of older caregivers in Canada](#)" is now available in *Insights on Canadian Society* ([75-006-X](#)).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).