

Eldercare in Canada: Who does how much?

by *Judith A. Frederick and Janet E. Fast*

Canada's aging population has raised concerns about our ability to care for ailing seniors. At the same time that demand for caregiving is increasing, the supply of informal caregivers is diminishing. Most women, who have traditionally performed these roles, are now in the paid workforce, dealing with the joint demands of job and family. In addition, later marriage and childbearing, declining fertility, and high divorce and remarriage rates are resulting in fewer adult children who are able to care for elderly parents in ill health. More frequent moves may also mean that many miles separate potential caregivers from family and friends in need.

These conditions have been accompanied by fiscal and economic restructuring of health and social services, as well as a change in philosophy about how best to meet seniors' needs. In particular, emphasis has shifted from the institutional care of chronic and long-term patients to community-based care, which depends heavily on caregiving assistance from family and friends. Using data from the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS), this article looks at the people who are providing care to seniors with a long-term health problem, the factors that influence the amount of time they devote to eldercare, and the types of hardships they experience as a result of helping.

Women do the bulk of eldercare

In 1996, about 2.1 million Canadians looked after older family members or friends with a long-term health problem. More than two-thirds of informal caregivers were between the ages of 30 and 59; the average age was 46 years for women and 44 years for men. Not surprisingly, given their age, over two-thirds of caregivers were in the paid workforce, although women were considerably less likely to

CST What you should know about this study

This article uses data from the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS) on social and community support. The GSS interviewed nearly 13,000 Canadians aged 15 and over living in private dwellings in the ten provinces. Data were collected on the amount of time men and women spent caring for a relative or friend aged 65 and over with a long-term physical or health limitation. As well, respondents were asked how these caregiving responsibilities had affected their lives. This study is based on 1,366 caregiver/care receiver dyads.

The regression analyses were modelled on the findings published in the relevant literature. Earlier researchers have suggested that the amount of time people spend helping seniors is determined by three sets of factors: the characteristics of the caregiver; those of the care receiver; and the nature of the relationship between the two people, such as physical proximity and emotional closeness. The variables used in the regression analysis are: gender and age (as a proxy for illness) of care receiver; age, marital status, place of residence, education and employment status of caregiver, presence of children under 15, number of people being cared for, length of time providing care, primary caregiver status, relationship to care receiver, physical proximity and emotional closeness.

be employed outside the home. More than two-thirds were married and over one-quarter were also taking care of children under 15 years. Six in ten caregivers had been providing eldercare for more than two years, but only one-third were the primary caregiver; that is, someone who had the main responsibility for ensuring that the senior's needs were met.

Despite the influx of women into the paid workforce, in 1996 women still dominated the field of senior care. Not only did they represent the majority of informal caregivers (61% or 1.3 million), but they also spent much more time than men on care-related tasks (5 hours per week compared with 3). The reasons for these longer hours are fairly straightforward; many women were caring for more than two seniors (42% versus 34% of men) and women were considerably more likely to be the primary caregiver (39% versus 27% of men). Women were also more likely to be caring for a senior who was very ill.

The majority of caregivers looked after a parent or parents: 55% were caring for an elderly parent and 39% for a friend, sibling or other family member. It is surprising that only 1 in 20 were caring for a spouse.¹ Although the large majority of caregivers were looking after a senior living in the same neighbourhood or surrounding area, very few were caring for someone who actually lived with them: 16% of women and 11% of men.

Caregiving hours vary widely

The time spent on eldercare depends on many social and economic influences that determine caregivers' sense of duty and responsibility; in practical terms, it depends on their capacity to help. Although caregivers in general devoted an average of 4.2 hours per week to caring for seniors, the amount of time any individual spent varied enormously. With less free time, it is no surprise that caregivers employed full-time spent less than 3.5 hours per week on eldercare, while those who were not in the paid workforce spent almost 6 hours. On the other hand, most people providing care to more than one person devoted less time to eldercare than those who were responsible for only one person. And caregivers who had been providing care for more than two years dedicated fewer hours per week than those who had spent less than six months looking after a senior.

1. The literature indicates that a much larger proportion of people are providing care to spouses. Spousal care may have been undercounted by the GSS because respondents considered it to be part of their regular duties as a wife or husband, not a separate responsibility.

The characteristics of the senior receiving care also played a role in time spent on eldercare. Although all care receivers had a health problem, those who were so ill they had died in the 12 months preceding the survey required almost 10 hours of care per week; in contrast, less than 4 hours were needed by younger care receivers aged 65 to 74. And although very few caregivers were providing eldercare to a husband or wife, the amount given (16 hours a week) was three to five times greater than that dedicated to other family members, including a parent.

Significant predictors of caregiving hours differ for women and men

To identify the factors with a statistically significant effect on hours of caregiving, a stepwise regression was performed. This technique calculates the effect of a change in one variable, while holding the effect of all other variables constant. Since the characteristics of women and men caregivers are quite different, two separate models were run, with results showing that significant predictors of caregiving hours are not the same for women as for men.

For women, four characteristics affect hours of eldercare. Assuming all other factors remain constant, women who were primary caregivers spent an additional 3.6 hours per week on eldercare than those who were not. On the other hand, women providing care to a senior who lived outside the household devoted 8 to 10 hours less than those who looked after a senior in the home. Presumably, caring for someone with whom they are not living severely constrains the amount of time women are able to devote to the task.

The health of the care receiver also affects the time allocated to care, when all other factors are controlled for. Women helping seniors who had recently died had dedicated 4 more hours than those who were looking after someone younger and healthier. This is to be expected, since very ill seniors probably needed time-consuming palliative care.

The emotional quality of the relationship was also significant; women helping seniors they felt close to devoted nearly 3 hours more per week to the task, perhaps because emotional closeness instils a greater sense of obligation.

As was the case with women, primary caregiver status and the frailty of the senior are significant predictors of the hours that men spend on eldercare. Men who were primary caregivers spent an additional 2.5 hours per week on eldercare, while caring for a senior who was very ill demanded 5 more hours. However, most significant factors were different than those for women. The relationship to the care receiver was key for men: men who were looking

Six in ten caregivers have been providing eldercare for more than two years

	% of caregivers			Average hours per week		
	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men
TOTAL	100	100	100	4.2	5.0	3.0
Caregiver is employed full-time	56	47	71	3.4	4.2	2.6
... employed part-time	12	15	7	4.0	4.6	2.3
... not in labour force	32	38	22	5.8	6.2	5.0
Caregiver is a primary caregiver	34	39	27	8.0	8.8	6.2
... not a primary caregiver	66	61	73	2.3	2.6	1.9
Caregiver is caring for spouse or partner	5	5	4	16.0	15.8	16.3
... for parent	55	57	54	4.5	5.2	3.4
... for sibling	4	4	3	4.4	5.4	2.5
... for other family member	16	16	17	3.0	4.1	1.3
... for friend	19	18	21	2.3	2.8	1.6
... for other	1	1	--	1.3	1.5	0.6
Caregiver feels very close to care receiver	52	55	47	5.7	6.4	4.5
... close	30	31	30	3.3	4.2	1.9
... does not feel close	18	15	23	1.7	1.8	1.6
Caregiver provides care for less than 6 months	13	14	13	5.3	7.1	2.4
... for 6 to 12 months	11	10	12	3.8	4.6	2.8
... for 1 to 2 years	16	16	15	4.7	4.2	5.5
... for more than 2 years	60	60	61	4.0	4.8	2.6
Caregiver is caring for one person	30	28	33	5.0	6.2	3.3
... for two people	32	31	33	4.0	5.4	1.9
... for three	19	21	15	3.4	2.9	4.5
... for four	12	12	13	5.1	6.2	3.5
... for five or more	8	9	6	3.2	3.2	3.3
Care receiver is aged 65 to 74	29	28	31	3.6	4.8	2.0
... aged 75 to 84	41	42	41	3.8	4.2	3.2
... aged 85 and over	18	18	19	3.4	4.4	2.0
... deceased in previous year	11	12	9	9.6	9.8	9.1
Care receiver lives in same household	14	16	11	12.3	13.7	9.3
... in same neighbourhood	50	50	51	3.3	3.8	2.5
... in surrounding area	22	22	23	2.8	3.4	1.9
... less than half a day away	10	9	12	2.6	2.1	3.3
... more than half a day away	4	4	4	2.5	4.0	0.5

-- Sample too small to provide reliable estimate.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 General Social Survey.

after their wives spent 11 to 13 hours more per week on eldercare than those providing care to anyone else. This probably reflects the affection and obligation men feel towards their wives, as well as the stark reality that no one else is as readily available to help.

The effect of months already spent providing care is quite pronounced. After controlling for other factors, men with one to two years' caregiving experience allocated 2 hours more per week than men who had been caregiving for less than 6 months, perhaps because they were helping someone whose needs had escalated over time. Marital status also proved to be important, since widowers spent 4 hours more per week on eldercare. And as the number of persons being cared for increased, so did the amount of time men devoted to the task: 36 minutes per week for each additional person.

Although the findings of the regression analysis are useful and interesting, they explain only part of the variation in the time spent caregiving by women (25%) and by men (35%). These results are typical of social science research, and suggest that not all the best predictors of caregiving are demographic or socioeconomic. Rather, they are more complex interpersonal elements that may be impossible to capture in a quantitative survey.

The more help caregivers provide, the more stressed their lives become

Although helping an elderly parent, other family member or friend is generally an act of love, it can be stressful and time consuming. Often it conflicts with the caregiver's other obligations or with activities that she or he would like to pursue. From questions that caregivers were asked about the effect of eldercare on their own lives, a set of "consequences indices" was constructed.² Then, a number of regressions were run to determine whether the number of hours devoted to care had a significant effect on those four key areas of the caregiver's life.

Not surprisingly, the highest level of psychological and emotional burden was experienced by those caregivers who spent the most time providing care. Difficulty balancing work and family, lack of free time, wishing that someone else would take over, and anger with the person they were looking after were some of the concerns expressed by caregivers. Most women (83%) and men (89%) who spent 7.5 hours or more per week helping seniors reported some level of burden. And with every extra hour of care, the level of

stress climbed: women's score on the burden index increased by 0.4% and men's by 0.6%.

Providing care often imposes substantial restrictions on social activities, holiday plans, finances and sleep patterns. Some 45% of women and 54% of men who provided at least 7.5 hours of care a week reported that at least three of these four elements had changed as a result of their eldercare responsibilities. For every additional hour of care provided, both women's and men's scores on the social consequences index increased by 0.8%.

The economic consequences of caregiving — putting off plans to enrol in education or training, declining a job offer, turning down a job transfer or promotion — were significant for men but not for women. The percentage of men reporting that their obligations had delayed their plans escalated from 5% to 34% as care demands rose from less than 2

to over 7.5 hours per week. In fact, every additional hour of care provided to a senior raised men's score on the postpone index by 1.2%. Such lost opportunities can result in lifelong disadvantages in terms of employment, income and pension contributions.

It seems reasonable to assume that caregivers who do more would feel less guilty about not doing enough. Interestingly, this was not true of women, but it was the case for men. The more time men spent caregiving, the less likely they were to feel that they should be doing more or that they could do a better job. For example, 65% of men who spent less than two hours a week providing care experienced high levels of guilt, but just 52% of those who spent over 7.5 hours felt this way. For every additional hour of eldercare, men's score on the guilt index declined by nearly 1%. In contrast, additional hours of caregiving did not have a significant effect on women's score on the guilt index.

Summary

Although this article does not examine all factors associated with the time people spend on eldercare, it is possible to draw some conclusions about Canada's caregivers. In general, committed caregivers devote more time when a greater need exists. Women who spent the most time helping seniors were primary caregivers who cared for dying relatives, lived with them, and were emotionally close to them. Similarly, the men who devoted most time to these tasks also were primary caregivers looking after their wives.

For both men and women, longer hours of care resulted in greater emotional and psychological burden and greater personal consequences. But only men reported feeling less guilt the more time they spent caregiving. And men were

Men looking after their wives spend 11 to 13 hours more per week on eldercare

2. The consequences indices include the emotional and psychological burden index, the social index, the postpone index and the guilt index.

much more likely to postpone educational and job opportunities to fulfil their caregiving obligations — something that may profoundly affect their current and future financial situation.

It is fair to say that all stakeholders — caregivers, seniors, and government — prefer community care to institutional care for seniors. However, the current trend to community-based care, combined with the diminishing availability of informal caregivers, increases the risk of burnout for caregivers. Paradoxically, caregiver burnout may lead to the very outcome that everyone is trying to avoid: a greater need for institutionalization.

Programs and policies that assist with eldercare may help those caregivers most at risk of burnout. Similarly, home-care training and more readily available family-related leave from work may increase caregivers' competency and time, thereby reducing some of the stress associated with eldercare.

This article is adapted from *Eldercare in Canada: Context, Content and Consequences*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-570-XPE.

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S O C I A L I N D I C A T O R S

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
ECONOMY									
<i>Annual % change</i>									
Gross Domestic Product	3.3	0.8	2.2	3.8	5.9	5.2	3.3	4.8	2.5
Total personal income	7.3	3.3	2.6	2.0	2.0	4.0	2.2	3.7	4.0
Expenditures on goods and services ¹	1.3	-1.4	1.8	1.8	3.1	2.1	2.5	4.2	2.8
Consumer Price Index ²	4.8	5.6	1.5	1.9	0.2	2.2	1.6	1.6	1.0
Saving rate (%)	9.5	9.5	10.2	9.5	7.6	7.4	5.4	2.1	1.2
Prime lending rate	14.06	9.94	7.48	5.94	6.88	8.65	6.06	4.96	6.60
5-year mortgage rate	13.35	11.13	9.51	8.78	9.53	9.16	7.93	7.07	6.93
Exchange rate (with U.S. dollar)	1.167	1.146	1.209	1.290	1.366	1.372	1.364	1.385	1.484
ENVIRONMENT									
Number of days with airborne particles exceeding objectives (Canada average)	4.7	8.2	6.6	6.1	–	–	–	–	–
Number of hours ground-level ozone exceeded objectives (Canada average)	8.8	14.8	4.9	3.1	6.5	–	–	–	–
Number of days per year air quality rated as poor									
CMA of Toronto	16	29	9	12	14	14	–	–	–
CMA of Montréal	3	4	6	3	3	5	–	–	–
CMA of Vancouver	2	7	–	–	1	–	–	–	–
Billions of public transit passengers	1.48	1.43	1.41	1.38	1.35	1.37	1.35	1.38	–
% of class 1 farmland used by urban areas	–	9.9	–	–	–	–	11.2	–	–
JUSTICE									
Rate per 100,000 population									
Total Criminal Code offences	9,454	10,313	9,982	9,467	9,042	8,913	8,828	8,355	–
Property offences	5,593	6,143	5,870	5,534	5,209	5,236	5,213	4,817	–
Violent offences	970	1,056	1,078	1,074	1,038	998	990	980	–
Other Criminal Code offences	2,891	3,114	3,034	2,860	2,795	2,678	2,625	2,558	–
Average days to process case through courts									
Adults	–	–	–	–	135	141	148	157	–
Youths ³	–	–	101	112	111	118	117	105	–
Average length of sentence per case									
Adults (days in prison)	–	–	–	–	125	132	137	142	–
Youths (days of open and secure custody)	–	–	92	92	88	82	79	74	–
CIVIC SOCIETY									
Voter turnout in federal elections	–	–	–	69.6	–	–	–	67.0	–
% of eligible foreign-born holding citizenship	–	81.0	–	–	–	–	83.0	–	–
Attendance at heritage institutions ('000) ⁴	–	113,785	108,836	108,194	111,236	–	–	–	–
Government expenditures on culture and heritage (millions\$) ⁵	–	–	4.631	4.606	4.532	4.520	–	–	–
% attending religious services at least several times a year	54	54	56	52	54	51	50	–	–
% of taxfilers making charitable donations	30	30	29	28	27	27	27	26	–
Average amount of charitable donations (current dollars)	545	567	586	610	634	647	728	808	–

– Data not available.

1. Data in 1992 dollars.

2. 1992 = 100.

3. Excludes Alberta.

4. Includes only not-for-profit institutions that have an educational and/or interpretive component: nature parks, historic sites, museums, archives and other institutions.

5. Excludes intergovernmental transfers. Data in 1986 dollars.

EDUCATORS' NOTEBOOK

Suggestions for using Canadian Social Trends in the classroom

Lesson plan for “Seniors behind the wheel”

Objectives

- To explore the importance of driving for seniors
- To consider Canadians' dependence on the car

Method

1. Read the article, “Seniors behind the wheel,” and list at least four transportation issues that differentiate the situation of rural or small town and urban seniors.
2. A neighbour is recently widowed. Since her husband used to do all the driving and she doesn't feel comfortable sitting behind the wheel, she has chosen to sell the family car. Can you suggest some transportation options for her? She will regularly need to go to the grocery store, seniors' club and doctor. She will also want to visit her grandchildren and friends.
3. Why do you think senior men are more likely than senior women to drive? Predict if this situation will continue in the future. Explain your answer.
4. Do you agree with mandatory medical examinations for senior drivers? What should they be tested for? The requirements for medical and other tests vary from province to province. Why is that so?
5. Do you think seniors are safer drivers than 16- to 24-year-olds? How would you measure “safe driving”? What are some of the differences and similarities between the driving habits of individuals in these age groups?
6. Take a quick poll of students in the class to find out how many have a car in their family. Some teenagers are allowed use of the family car. How should they share the responsibility of paying for insurance, gas and maintenance?

Using other resources

- Canada's Changing Retirement Patterns: Findings from the General Social Survey*. 1996. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-546-XPE.
- A Portrait of Seniors in Canada*. 1997. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-519-XPE.
- “Seniors 75+: Living arrangements and lifestyle.” *Canadian Social Trends*, Autumn 1993.
- “Behind the wheel: Canadians and their cars.” *Canadian Social Trends*, Autumn 1994.

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EDUCATORS

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