

The Rethinking Canada's Aging Population 2007 Study

Filling Critical Gaps in Our Knowledge

The Challenge

The notion that Canada must address the myriad challenges of a rapidly aging population has become a public policy cliché. Yet, our knowledge of the condition, views and aspirations of older Canadians tends to be limited or superficial. While it is generally understood that seniors will comprise a significantly larger proportion of the population than they currently do, and that this has serious implications for a range of issues (health care, labour markets, housing), many critical gaps exist in our understanding of the impacts of aging on individuals, communities, and the country as a whole. For example, few of us know that men over 85 years of age have the highest suicide rate in Canada, or that this rate has increased by nearly 33 per cent over a four-year period. More significantly, we know little about what is behind this troubling trend.

The State of the Research

In this country, the vast majority of studies that focus on older people emanate from gerontology. While surveys of Canadian public opinion obviously include older Canadians in their samples, the relatively small size greatly limits the depth of analysis. Moreover, most surveys group all "seniors" as those 55 years of age and older. Our analysis of recent public opinion studies suggests that significant attitudinal differences are exhibited when "seniors" are grouped into sub-cohorts based on their lifecycle stage: i.e., 55 to 64 years of age ("pre-retirement"), 65 to 79 years of age ("retirement") and 80 years of age and older ("twilight"). These attitudinal differences cover a wide range of areas from volunteerism and political activism to perceptions of the health care system and attachment to country.

Our understanding of how older people live and think is further limited by the fact that public opinion research studies of the Canadian population as a whole are not designed to explore issues that are uniquely relevant to

seniors. In contrast, other segments of the population (particularly youth and Aboriginal people) have been the focus of dedicated public opinion research for some years now. To put things into perspective, during the fiscal year 2001-2002 (the last year for which this type of data is available) only three of the 667 public opinion research (POR) studies conducted by the Government of Canada focused specifically on seniors, accounting for one-fifth of one per cent of total POR expenditures.¹

The Government of Canada's primary source of information on the state of well-being of Canada's seniors is the National Advisory Council on Aging. It, in turn, appears to rely heavily on Statistics Canada data as the basis for much of its analysis and policy advice. Statistics Canada studies, however, do not include attitudinal indicators. The Council's key publication is its *Report Card on Seniors in Canada*. The *Report Card*, which looks at the health of seniors, the health care system, seniors' economic status, living conditions and participation in society, was last issued in 2001 and another is expected later this year. While improvements in the availability of indicators might have occurred over the last five years, the Council's 2001 report identified a number of important research gaps (many of them attitudinal in nature), including the following²:

- Extent to which seniors are served by the health care system (e.g., accessibility, comprehensiveness, effectiveness, appropriateness and satisfaction);
- Self-assessment of economic well-being;
- Proportion of seniors unable to afford shelter that meet adequacy, suitability and affordability norms;

¹ Public Works and Government Services Canada: POR Annual Report 2001-2002. The more recent reports no longer include a break of research by target population.

² National Advisory Council on Aging. *Seniors in Canada: A Report Card*. 2001.

- Percentage of seniors volunteering informally; and
- Proportion of seniors reporting involuntary retirement due to mandatory retirement laws.

There are several other seniors and aging issues that are extremely relevant to the Government of Canada. Canada's aging population will have far-reaching impacts on the country's economy and labour market (e.g., productivity, competitiveness, immigration, social programs, etc.). In response, many experts have suggested that anticipated labour shortages can be partially addressed by fostering phased retirement and workplace flexibility policies to encourage higher participation of older workers.³ Similarly, the promotion of life-long learning is believed to have positive impacts on both labour market and wellness outcomes.⁴ However, there is little understanding of how seniors themselves view these types of policy prescriptions.

Emergency preparedness among seniors is another key issue in need of study. Older Canadians face specific challenges that become more difficult during emergency situations such as the outbreak of communicable diseases (e.g., SARS, Avian flu), heat waves, power outages, ice and snowstorms, etc.

The Study Objectives

The purpose of this syndicated study is to fill a number of important gaps in our understanding of the attitudes and behaviour of older Canadians. It will focus on issues that are of particular relevance to seniors and which have not to been significantly, if at all, addressed by public opinion research conducted in Canada to date.

³ Canadian Policy Research Networks. *Labour Force Aging and Skill Shortages in Canada and Ontario*.

⁴ Cusack, S.A. (1995). Developing a lifelong learning program: Empowering seniors as leaders in lifelong learning. *Educational Gerontology* 21(4), 305-320.

Thematic Overview

The study issues/questions will be developed in close consultation with clients. Below we outline some proposed areas of examination for the study:

- Satisfaction and confidence in key elements of the health care system (e.g., primary care, home care, prescriptions, etc.)
- Level of access to/knowledge of wellness approaches and strategies (e.g., falls prevention programs).
- Labour-market issues (e.g., needs of older workers, barriers to successful transition to post-"retirement" employment, life-long learning, etc.).
- Perceived adequacy of housing and housing needs.
- Community/civic participation (e.g., informal volunteering, extent of social support network).
- Self-assessment of economic well-being (current and future).
- Security and safety (e.g., victimization, emergency preparedness).

Methodology

The methodology for this study would involve a nationally representative telephone survey of 1,200 Canadians 55 years of age or older. Survey results will be statistically reliable in all major regions of Canada. The questionnaire will be developed in close consultation with participating subscribers, and will be designed to gain insight into the public perspective regarding the study issues outlined above.

We will cross-tabulate the survey results by a range of demographic and socio-economic variables (e.g., gender, income, education) to get a clearer understanding of the results obtained. In addition, we will conduct a segmentation of respondents using cluster analysis. Cluster analysis is a multivariate statistical procedure aimed at identifying relatively homogeneous groups or clusters. Forming clusters of individuals and studying the characteristics that they share, as well as those in which they differ, provides valuable insights into the data collected.

Once analysis of the data is complete, we will submit a report containing detailed analysis of the survey results, as well as an executive summary of key findings and implications from the study.

Please note that a minimum of five partners will be needed to undertake the study. As well, we will limit the number of privileged subscriptions to seven.

Tentative Schedule

Assuming sufficient participation, the study will commence in January 2007. The major milestones are show below.

Design	February-April 2007
Data Collection	May-June 2007
Analysis and Reporting	July-August 2007

Costs

There are three levels of subscription:

Limited Subscription	E-version and 1 hard copy of all deliverables.		
\$15,000 (excluding GST)	Access to the Rethinking Canada's Aging Population database (in electronic format).		E-version and 4 hard copies of all deliverables.
Core Subscription	E-version and 2 hard copies of all deliverables	Privileged Subscription	Access to the Rethinking Canada's Aging Population database (in electronic format).
\$25,000 (excluding GST)	Access to the Rethinking Canada's Aging Population database (in electronic format).	\$50,000 (excluding GST)	Opportunity to define, jointly with EKOS, 15 special purpose closed questions.
	Opportunity to define, jointly with EKOS, 5 special purpose closed questions.		A customized presentation (in Ottawa), at client convenience.

Additional (client-specific) questions will be charged at \$2,000 for each close-ended question, and \$2,500 for each open-ended question.

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