

Diversity and Equity in Alberta in 2016

by Harvey Krahn

More seniors, spiralling health care costs, pension plan problems—is this the future?

Canada's population is slowly aging. But in many ways, Alberta is unique.

Understanding how our population is changing can assist us in planning for the future and in shaping a society in which both diversity and equity are valued.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF POPULATION PROJECTIONS

Demographers typically use time-series data for the three main components of population change—fertility (birth rates), mortality (death rates), and migration (both interprovincial and international)—to project future population growth. The first two components, while changing over the long term, have been highly stable in how they changed. After all, as demographers know, life is a sexually transmitted disease with a 100 per cent mortality rate.

The total *fertility* rate is the average number of births per woman, assuming women live through their reproductive years. Population replacement level is 2.1 births per woman. In Alberta the fertility rate dropped below replacement level in the late 1970s, and has continued to decline steadily. As for *mortality*, the life expectancy of Albertans has been slowly rising for decades. In 1996, life expectancy at birth was 81.4 years for females and 75.95 years for males.

The migration component of population change is much more volatile. International migration is largely a function of (national) immigration policy, which in turn is often influenced by the business cycle. Thus, over the course of the last century, immigration rates were

typically high when unemployment rates were low, a phenomenon best explained by the lobbying of industrialists seeking an expanded workforce when the economy was strong and unions opposing immigration when many of their members were seeking work. The only real exception to this pattern was in the late 1980s when national unemployment rates were very high (well in excess of 10%) and up to 250,000 immigrants a year were being admitted to Canada.

Ottawa decision-makers have recognized that immigration can be used to bolster a workforce and tax base that is shrinking due to population aging. Hence, the maintenance of high immigration quotas during a period of high unemployment may simply have reflected a conclusion that population aging was the more serious problem. Alternatively, as the demographer-economist David Foot has speculated, in the late 1980s the Mulroney government was facing the most negative polling results of any recent national government. Perhaps it tried to use immigration policy to bolster its support, reasoning that the immigrant community, along with the business community that typically favours high levels of immigration, would vote Tory. Needless to say, the Tory votes did not materialize and

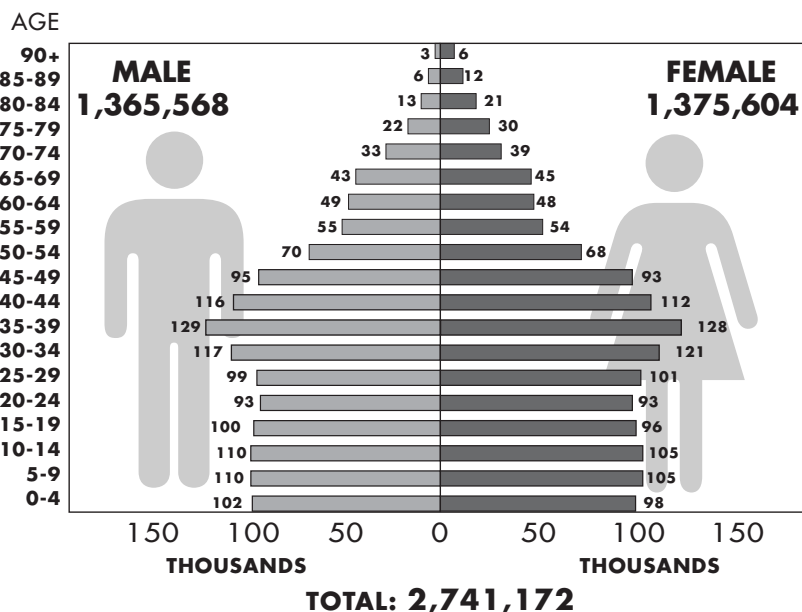
widespread public opposition led to a significant reduction in immigration numbers in the early 1990s.

Whatever the explanation, the point is clear—political decisions largely determine levels of international migration, and immigration policies can change quickly. Thus, as the national economy recovered in the mid-1990s, immigration quotas were again loosened. Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s 1999 Immigration Plan proposed that, including refugees, between 200,000 and 225,000 immigrants would be admitted.

Interprovincial migration is equally volatile, particularly in Alberta, where a “boom and bust” economy has attracted thousands of workers and their families when the economy was hot and then pushed out large numbers during times of recession. Between 1976 and 1981, for example, Alberta gained almost 200,000 people from other provinces. Truck rental companies offered Ontario migrants reduced rates if they would drive their rented vehicle part or all the way back to Ontario. The alternative was a massive build-up of rental vehicles in Edmonton and Calgary. In the following five years, net interprovincial migration was negative—the number of out-migrants exceeded interprovincial in-migrants by about 28,000 between 1981 and 1986. It has been speculated that the city of Edmonton did not conduct a civic census for a number of years in the mid-80s because evidence of a declining population might have led to reduced (per capita) transfer payments from the province.

Given the uncertainty surrounding migration trends, demographers hedge their predictions of future population growth by setting out low, medium and high assumptions for fertility, mortality, and migration trends. They then typically recommend the 3M projection (medium fertility, mortality and migration) out of the nine possible population growth scenarios. However, the most recent publicly available provincial projections are based on an M-M-H set of assumptions. The Alberta Health demographers who prepared these projections reasoned that the province’s economy has been very strong for some years and will continue to be so, thus leading to continued high rates of in-migration.

FIGURE 1: POPULATION BY AGE AND SEX, ALBERTA, 1996



Source: Alberta Health, 1998, Population Projections for Alberta and its Health Regions, 1996-2016, p. 28

ALBERTA’S POPULATION IN 1996 AND IN 2016

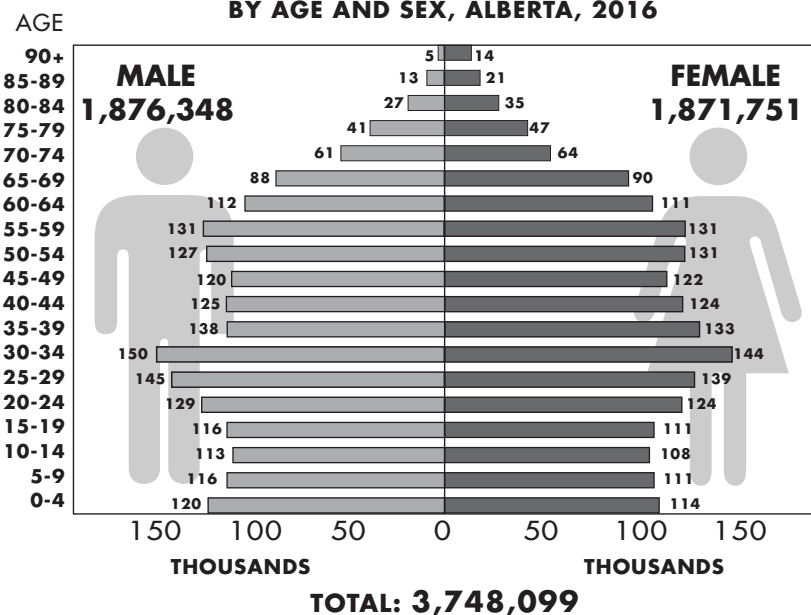
Data obtained from the Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan were used to estimate the provincial population to be 2,741,172 as at June 30, 1996. Figure 1 profiles the Alberta population by age and sex in 1996. The baby-boom generation (born between 1947 and 1967) stands out, its members ranging in age from about 30 to 50. While the baby-boomers have had significantly fewer children than their parents, the absolute size of the post-WWII generation has meant that, once its members started having children, a large “echo generation” has appeared at the bottom of the population pyramid. Figure 1 also highlights the pattern of relatively fewer females at the bottom of the pyramid (male births outnumber female births) and relatively fewer males at the top (women outlive men). Thus, in 1996, female senior citizens (65 and older) outnumbered male seniors by almost 34,000. Together, the 272,953 seniors represented almost 10% of the total provincial population. Among Albertans aged 85 and older, women outnumbered men by more than two to one.

What will Alberta’s population profile look like in 2016? The total population is projected to be 3,748,099 (see Figure 2), an increase of slightly more than one million over twenty years. The province’s population had already grown to 2.94 million by January 1, 1999. Hence, additional growth over the remaining 17 years of the projection cycle (from 1999 to 2016) is expected to involve about 800,000 people. Picture it as a new city

Picture a city the size of Red Deer populated by seniors 85 and older, two women for every man.

about the size of Calgary today. By 2016 we can expect over half a million seniors to be resident in the province, a group representing 13.5% of the total population. The Alberta Health projections indicate that the 85 and older cohort will contain 53,305 people. Picture a city almost as large as Red Deer, populated by “old” senior citizens, approximately two women for every man. By 2016, a significant proportion of the baby boom generation will be retired, assuming that concept still has meaning two decades from now. The older members of the echo generation will be well into their 30s. Because of this cohort’s relatively large size, its children will form an echo-echo generation, reflecting the powerful impact of the baby boom that occurred over half a century earlier.

FIGURE 2: POPULATION PROJECTION BY AGE AND SEX, ALBERTA, 2016



Source: Alberta Health, 1998, Population Projections for Alberta and its Health Regions, 1996-2016, p. 28

IMPLICATIONS OF POPULATION GROWTH AND AGING

During the 1980s, as the topic of population aging began to enter social planning discussions, many observers had a distinctly negative view of the future. They worried about insufficient health-care resources for an aging population, too few workers paying taxes, and an under-financed national pension system. Such concerns undoubtedly had an impact on public policy at both the national and the provincial levels. Attempts to adjust national immigration quotas to compensate for declining fertility, and cut-backs in health care systems across the country, are only two of the policy responses that can be traced back to a growing awareness of the population aging “problem.”

Today, at the close of the century, some of the more pessimistic predictions are being re-examined. Health-

care analysts have reminded us that most senior citizens remain healthy and independent long after they retire. Some accountants have begun to question the “fact” that the national pension plan is about to implode. Criminologists have pointed out that declining crime rates can be traced, in large part, to a smaller youth cohort. Labour market analysts suggest that, with more people staying healthy longer and with a decline in the relative size of the traditional workforce, a larger proportion of workers will remain employed past age 65, thus increasing their retirement earnings and reducing demand on the national pension system.

A RELATIVELY YOUNG POPULATION

In fact, when we compare Alberta to other provinces, it is apparent that we have more time to plan for the future. In 1996, Saskatchewan already had almost 15% of its population in the “senior” category (an age profile much like that of many western European countries, including France, Germany, Sweden and the UK). Alberta will not reach this point in its population aging process for another 20 years, in part because, over the years, many younger Saskatchewan residents migrated to Alberta. In 1989, as the Berlin Wall was being torn down, a popular joke in Saskatchewan asked: “*What’s the difference between people leaving East Germany and people leaving Saskatchewan?*” The answer: “*In East Germany, they can leave by train.*”

Alberta’s relatively young population can be traced, in large part, to the retired oil derrick in a small park at the south city limits of Edmonton.

Notwithstanding periodic recessions, ever since Leduc No. 1 gushed in back in 1947 a strong oil-and-gas-based economy has encouraged young interprovincial migrants to leave other provinces for Alberta. As they say in Fort McMurray, “*This is the second biggest Newfoundland city in Canada.*”

While the echo and echo-echo generations will, in time, begin to have a greater impact on provincial public policy, the baby boom generation continues to have a significant impact on Alberta society, as does the strong economy. The explosion of monster homes in the suburbs of Calgary and Edmonton, and in other mid-sized urban centres, is only one example. Continued strong support for investments in education—primary, secondary and post-secondary—highlights the value that baby boomers place on education. In his best-selling book *Boom, Bust & Echo*, and in its sequel, David Foot writes that demand for continuing education for personal

pleasure and enlightenment is growing as the “boomers” move towards the end of their careers and into retirement. But in Alberta, this cohort remains very concerned about obtaining a good education for its children, without having to remortgage their homes to pay for it.

Discussions about the growing need for geriatric medicine and about housing shortages for the elderly have begun in Alberta, but the demand remains muted. In time it will grow, but most media stories about negative impacts of health-care cutbacks continue to focus on children. The fact that other provinces and countries have moved further down the population-aging road offers Alberta a unique opportunity. Rather than experimenting with user-pay medicine and private hospitals for (older) wealthy Americans and out-of-province Canadians, we should be taking the opportunity to explore how Saskatchewan and Manitoba are handling the health care and social needs of their larger elderly populations. A wide range of European societies with large proportions of senior citizens can also provide us with examples of service provision models.

A VERY YOUNG ABORIGINAL POPULATION

In 1996, the national census revealed that 2.8% of the Canadian population was of aboriginal origin. The figure was considerably higher in Alberta (4.6%), where 72,645 individuals identified themselves as North American Indian, 50,745 indicated that they were of Métis origin, and 795 self-reported their ancestry as Inuit. By way of contrast, in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan the aboriginal population made up over 11% of the provincial population.

For Canada as a whole, the average age of the aboriginal population was 25.5 years, ten years younger than the average age of the population as a whole. Thirty-five per cent of the aboriginal population was under the age of 15, compared to only 20% of the Canadian total. This very young population, in combination with much higher than average fertility rates (although they are declining), means that the aboriginal population of Canada, and of Alberta, will grow much more rapidly over the next few decades than the population as a whole. In 1993, Statistics Canada prepared a series of population projections for registered Indians (only a portion of the total aboriginal popula-

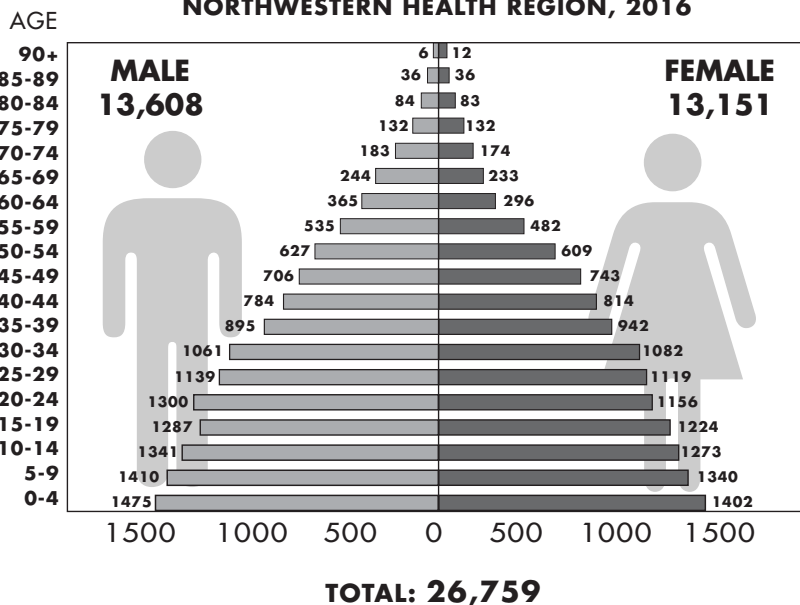
tion) for the period 1991 to 2015, showing that the growth rate of this population group was expected to be twice that of the population as a whole over most of this period.

As is the case elsewhere in Canada, unemployment rates in Alberta aboriginal communities and among urban aboriginals are often extremely high. By way of example, a 1998 census of Alberta’s eight Métis Settlements revealed unemployment rates of 43.3% among 15- to 24-year-old residents, 31.6% among those aged 25-44, and 25.6% among settlement residents between the ages of 45 and 64. At the time, the provincial unemployment rate was only 5.4%.

More than a third of the households in these settlements had annual incomes below Statistics Canada’s low-income line. It is important to note that, compared to many northern Indian reservations, economic conditions were relatively good on these eight Métis Settlements.

**Medicine Hat’s
population is more than
14% seniors, while Fort
McMurray has 1.7%.**

FIGURE 3: POPULATION PROJECTION BY AGE AND SEX, NORTHWESTERN HEALTH REGION, 2016



How can barriers to fuller participation in the province’s strong labour market be removed for aboriginal Albertans? As we move into the next century, we (aging baby boomers, that is) will become even more preoccupied with population aging. We cannot allow ourselves to forget that the aboriginal population will also be aging, but from a much younger base. Hence, a decade from now, when we will be lobbying for better pensions, more seniors’ centres, and health care systems designed for the elderly, the aboriginal population will probably still be in desperate need of education for

children, jobs for young adults, and health care for young families.

Figure 3 clearly makes this point, displaying the projected population of the Northwestern Health Region in 2016 based on Alberta Health calculations. Obviously, not all of the population of this region is aboriginal, but a large minority is. It is quite possible that, two decades from now, this Health Region may have been restructured, if the province is still operating with a system of health regions. But assuming it is, we see a classic population pyramid projected for 2016—a very large base of young children, and very few senior citizens. While we expect to see seniors making up 13.5% of the provincial population at that time (Figure 2), individuals aged 65 and older will make up only 5% of the population of this Health Region (Figure 3). The projected average (median) age for the province in 2016 is 36.9 years, compared to 24.9 for this region.

RURAL, URBAN, AND RESOURCE-TOWN ALBERTA

The term “rural Alberta” carries a number of connotations, including Conservative voting patterns provincially, Reform support federally, “family values,” opposition to gun control, and so on. What is sometimes forgotten is that rural Alberta is also elderly Alberta. As is the case in much of the rest of the country, rural counties have long experienced the “going down the road” phenomenon, that is, young people leaving for education and employment in larger cities. For example, a 1998 survey of all high school students in Flagstaff County in central Alberta showed that only 16% expected to live in or near their present community after they finished their education.

Because of this out-migration of the young, the proportion of senior citizens in Alberta’s small towns, villages, and rural areas (with the exception of northern aboriginal communities) is much higher than the provincial average, and can be expected to increase further over the next few decades. In 1986, only 8% of all Albertans were senior citizens, compared to 13.9% of Flagstaff County residents. By 1996, 15.5% of the county’s residents were 65 years of age and older, compared to only 9.8% of the provincial population.

Along with the rural areas, a number of mid-size urban centres also have older population profiles. Included among these retirement centres are Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, St. Paul, Stettler, Drumheller and Camrose. According to the 1996 national census, each of these cities had at least 14% senior citizens, in contrast to the provincial average of less than 10%. We

can expect these percentages to increase further as the overall population slowly ages over the next two decades. Edmonton and Calgary, in contrast, had senior citizen populations close to the 1996 provincial average (11% and 8.9%, respectively), as did Red Deer (9.5%). At the other end of the aging continuum were cities like Fort McMurray (1.7%), Whitecourt (2.8%), and Grande Cache (2.4%) with much smaller senior citizen populations. In these natural-resource-based communities, “Meals on Wheels” describes the teenager delivering pizzas in his Honda Civic.

Such very different population profiles and projections promise some interesting and complicated public policy decisions over the next few decades. Will the government be listening to the elderly residents of “rural Alberta” (and the retirement cities) when choosing between education, health care, social service or industrial investment? Or will it be paying attention to the urban dilemmas of middle-aged residents of the two largest cities, or to the young populations of the northern resource towns? And how will the voices of Alberta’s First Nations fit into this debate about the distribution of Alberta’s wealth?

Other things being equal, one would predict that the communities with the most votes would have the government’s ear. But in Alberta, some things are not equal. In a recent issue of this magazine, Douglas Stinson explained how two rural Alberta ballots have the same weight as three city ballots. The two largest cities in the province have continued to grow at a much faster rate than the rest of the province, but rural legislators have opposed efforts to redraw electoral boundaries, arguing that they have to cover much larger geographical areas when representing their constituencies.

As a result, rural ridings contain many fewer residents. For example, in 1996 the MLA for Calgary Fish Creek represented 35,666 residents, in contrast to the 16,621 residents in the Athabasca-Wabasca riding.

This problem has been examined by a number of legislative committees and by the Alberta Court of Appeal. Recommendations for change have been made, but the urban-rural voting inequity remains. The challenge for the next decade, as the larger urban centres in the province continue to grow faster than rural areas, will be to move toward greater democracy, that is, toward individual equality in voting power.

GROWING DIVERSITY

We often remind ourselves that Canada is a nation of immigrants. Virtually all of our ancestors came to this

***More than 18% of
Edmonton residents
self-identify as visible
minorities, while in
Grande Prairie
only 3.3% do.***

country seeking a better life and a wider range of opportunities. The highest level of immigration ever observed in Canada left a strong imprint on the ethnic make-up of Alberta, since a large proportion of the hundreds of thousands of eastern European immigrants who arrived in Canada in the early decades of the 20th century settled in central Alberta. While immigration levels declined in the middle of this century, they slowly rose again towards the end as immigration came to be seen as a means of stabilizing population change. Thus, for Canada as a whole, immigrants made up 15% of the population in 1951. By 1996, the comparable figure was 17.4%.

Alberta has the third highest proportion of immigrants among all ten provinces. In 1996, 15.2% of Albertans were immigrants. But within Alberta, the immigrant population varies widely. For example, in 1996, 22.5% of Edmonton residents were immigrants, along with 21.7% of Calgary residents, in contrast to only 9.7% in Red Deer, 9.2% in Medicine Hat, and 7.6% in Grande Prairie.

Few immigrants today come from western European countries. A large part of the explanation is demographic. Western European countries have much older populations than most African, Asian, and Central and South American countries, and immigrants tend to be younger. Before 1961, about 90% of all immigrants to Canada came from Europe. In the five-year period between 1991 and 1996, only 19% came from Europe, while 57% came from Asia. As a result, members of visible minority groups have dominated recent immigrant flows. In 1986, only 6.3% of Canadians identified themselves as members of a visible minority group. A decade later, this figure had risen to 11.2%, although the proportion of visible minorities was somewhat lower in Alberta (10.1%). But once again, the variation across the province is startling. While 18.1% of Edmonton residents self-identified as visible minorities in 1996, along with 16.5% of Calgary residents, the corresponding figures were much lower in Lethbridge (7.8%), Red Deer (5.0%), Medicine Hat (3.4%), and Grande Prairie (3.3%).

Over the next two decades much of Alberta's growth will come from international immigration. Most of these immigrants will be from non-traditional source countries, and many will be members of visible minority groups. Many will be relatively young, and most will settle in the province's two largest and faster-growing cities, where their votes may continue to be worth less

than those of other residents of the province. Thus, the intensification of the urban/rural divide will involve a growing differentiation between white, rural, elderly Alberta and a much more ethnically diverse, younger, urban population. The 21st century will provide legislators with some difficult and possibly divisive decisions about how to allocate public resources. How many tax dollars will be directed into seniors' lodges in small towns and into rural irrigation projects, and how many will be used to fund English as a Second Language courses and urban transit systems?

TOWARD 2016

In a provocative 1985 *Atlantic Monthly* article about "justice between generations," Phillip Longman recounts the European folk-tale about "the ungrateful son." The implications of this folk-tale are clear with respect to how we treat our parents and grandparents. The social solutions we construct for the problems of an aging society will be waiting for us when we get older. The story goes:

A widowed merchant, afraid for his future as an old man, asks his son and daughter-in-law whether he can live with them on their farm until he dies. In return, they will receive all he owns. His children welcome him, and the future inheritance, and the arrangement is mutually satisfactory for a number of years. But, in time, the merchant becomes forgetful and incapable of looking after himself. His son and daughter-in-law become

increasingly annoyed, and finally, decide that the time has come to move him out of the house. But the son cannot face his father with the decision, so he calls his own young son and tells him, "Take your grandfather to the barn. Put down some clean straw in the corner where the wind doesn't blow snow through the door. Lay your grandfather down, and cover him with the best horse blanket. He will be comfortable there until he dies."

Tearfully, the grandson carries out his father's orders. But he tears the horse blanket in two, covers his grandfather with one half, and folds and puts away the other. When his father asks whether he has done what he was told, his son tells him everything. His father is furious and shouts: "What kind of grandson would let his grandfather freeze in the barn with only half a blanket?"

"But, father," cries his son, "I am saving the other half for you." ☹

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How many tax dollars will be directed into seniors' lodges in small towns, and how many will be used to fund English as a Second Language courses and urban transit systems?
