

Canada



NATIONAL ADVISORY  
COUNCIL ON AGING

Highlights  
**1999**  
and Beyond

**Challenges**  
of an Aging  
Society



Government  
of Canada

Gouvernement  
du Canada



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Information on this summary booklet\* may be obtained from:

National Advisory Council on Aging

Address Locator: 1908A1

Ottawa, Ontario

K1A 1B4

Phone: (613) 957-1968

Fax: (613) 957-9938

E-mail: seniors@hc-sc.gc.ca

Internet: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/seniors-aines>

Patricia Raymaker

Chairperson

Nancy Garrard

Director

Division of Aging and Seniors

\*The full report is published under the title: *1999 and Beyond / Challenges of an Aging Canadian Society*.

This publication is available on the Internet and can be provided in alternative formats upon request.

1st printing, 1999

© Minister of Public Works and Government

Services Canada, 1999

Cat H88-3/27-1999E

ISBN 0-662-64369-0

Aussi disponible en français : *Faits saillants – 1999 et après / Les défis d'une société vieillissante*.

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# WHAT IS THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL ON AGING?

The National Advisory Council on Aging (NACA) was created by Order-in-Council on May 1, 1980 to assist and advise the Minister of Health on issues related to the aging of the Canadian population and the quality of life of seniors.

## MEMBERS OF NACA (May 1999)

Bubs Coleman	Saskatoon, SK
Mary Cooley	Halifax, NS
Jean-Claude Duclos	Montréal, QC
Dr. Michael Gordon	Toronto, ON
Don Holloway	Marystown, NF
Eileen Malone	Fredericton, NB
Gérald Poulin	Orleans, ON
Juliette Pilon	Sudbury, ON
Patricia Raymaker	Calgary, AB
Ruth Schiller	Osoyoos, BC
Yvette Sentenne	Montréal, QC
Joyce Thompson	Charlottetown, PEI

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# INTRODUCTION

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**T**his booklet presents highlights of a report by the National Advisory Council on Aging—*1999 and Beyond / Challenges of an Aging Canadian Society*. The report—published in this, the International Year of Older Persons—takes stock of seniors' situation today and examines what lies ahead. How will the next generations of seniors differ from the current ones? How will today's trends translate into tomorrow's challenges and opportunities? What will this mean for us as individuals and as a society?

NACA believes that the implications of an aging society will be profound and enduring. Seniors, like any age group, want a full and active role in Canadian society. Our goal is to help shape our society in ways that maximize the advantages of an older population while meeting the challenges.

It's up to everyone—individuals, governments, business, community organizations and the voluntary sector—to anticipate the challenges and take the steps needed to meet them. Some steps can be taken by one sector acting alone, while most would benefit from joint or combined action.

This booklet, and the full report, look at the facts and recent trends, and suggest actions that will help Canada move along the path toward an older yet healthier, more caring, and more equitable society—one that strives for fairness in giving all age groups a chance to meet their human development potential needs and fulfil their aspirations.

# TRENDS, CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES

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**N**ACA's report, *1999 and Beyond / Challenges of an Aging Canadian Society*, examines the situation of today's seniors, the trends that are affecting the shape and nature of tomorrow's senior population, and the implications of an aging Canadian society for individuals, families, and decision makers in both the private and the public sector.

In this booklet we concentrate on selected highlights of the report to convey the essential trends, challenges and possibilities that NACA sees over the next decade and beyond. Readers interested in a more detailed analysis—and in the sources on which the analysis is based—should consult the full report.

## Diversity in the same generation

For most seniors, Canada is a good place to grow older. Canadian seniors live longer and in better health than seniors in many other countries.

Canadian seniors are becoming a more diverse group, however, shaped by many factors and life experiences. For many seniors, this means longer, more fulfilling lives, with little change in physical and mental vigour. For others, the effects of disadvantages experienced earlier in their lives can be seen in poverty, disease, disability and premature death.

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Diversity suggests a need for flexibility and choice when we think about adapting to an aging population. Disparities—which affect not only seniors but every age group—suggest a need for action to deal with inequalities resulting from an individual’s social class, gender, occupation, and so on.

For NACA, the major challenges of the next century will be to change the public image of aging to reflect this diversity and to modify policies and practices in all sectors of society to respond flexibly to the range of seniors’ needs.

## Age-based perceptions

Public perceptions of aging and seniors are important, because they influence society’s decisions about them. For example, earlier in this century, seniors were thought of as poor, feeble and deserving of support. The result: age-based public and private pension programs and mandatory retirement.

That stereotype is changing. The vitality and prosperity of many seniors, combined with a difficult social and economic climate, conjure a very different image of seniors as wealthy, capable and less deserving of support.

This change has brought both negative and positive results:

- On the negative side, there is a tendency to lose sight of the needs of “vulnerable seniors” and to forget that the proportion of seniors living in poverty is similar to the proportion of children who are poor.



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- On the positive side, the new image creates more interest in and understanding of seniors' paid and unpaid contributions to society, challenges mandatory retirement practices, and encourages a more thoughtful approach to entitlements—one that looks at needs and capacities, instead of age alone.

With more seniors around and playing a variety of roles in community life, Canadians will develop a more balanced and realistic picture of seniors. Greater involvement by seniors and the aging of public figures will also help dispel old stereotypes.

## Adjusting to demographic aging

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Population share</b>
1998	3.7 million	12.3%
2016	5.9 million	15.9%
2021	6.9 million	17.8%
2041	9.7 million	22.6%

The aging of the population is no passing trend—here today, gone tomorrow. With people living longer and families having proportionately fewer children, seniors' larger share of the population—eventually reaching one-quarter of all Canadians—will remain for the foreseeable future.

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How can society adjust to aging? Fortunately, it's an issue Canada is not facing alone—all Western countries are experiencing similar change. What's more, the change is occurring fairly slowly, over a period of decades. Although it will no doubt put government spending under pressure in certain sectors and prompt some rethinking of financial priorities, it will not produce a crisis.

Even so, the effects of demographic change will be deep and lasting. Individuals, businesses and governments should already be thinking about how they can change their practices to maximize the advantages of demographic change. To do this, we need to predict how an aging baby boom generation will be different from today's seniors and plan accordingly.



### Tomorrow's seniors: different from today's

Research shows what most of us already know: *People are not aging now the way they used to.* Most seniors are in better physical and mental shape than their predecessors, and their economic situation is much improved too. Nor will new generations of seniors have much in common with earlier generations. For example, with higher education levels and more varied work experiences, tomorrow's seniors may

- have a better knowledge of community and government programs and services,

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- be more open to health promotion messages,
  - be more inclined to participate in educational, political and voluntary activities, and
  - be more likely to demand their rights.

The next generations of seniors will be used to keeping their work skills up-to-date, will thus find it easier to remain in the labour market if they want to, and will better plan for their retirement.

How should society react? It should provide an environment where seniors who are in good physical and mental health are able to lead active lives—with pursuits that let them keep on developing and achieving personal and social goals. Policies should support this—and even be a catalyst for action.

At the same time, social policy will have to recognize the needs and concerns of the most vulnerable members of our society, including “older” seniors whose health and well-being may require more social support.

## Looking at the whole picture

Thinking about an aging society sometimes creates concerns about whether society can “afford” to maintain current programs, given the growing imbalance between the size of the group receiving benefits and the size of the group paying the costs. Concerns focus especially on pensions and health care.

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NACA believes in taking a broader, more balanced view of these issues, looking not only at what an older population “costs” but also at what it contributes to the overall well-being of society. For example,

- Many seniors invest time and money for their families and in voluntary organizations. This social commitment is rarely accounted for in developing public policy.
- Demographic aging is not the most important factor determining future public costs and revenues. Health care and social security costs will increase, but other costs, such as education, will decline. The problem, then, is how to shift budgets to accommodate rising demands in some areas and falling demands in others.
- Society makes woefully little use of the potential of its older members. For example, business and government practices for managing the aging work force are usually limited to providing early retirement packages to older workers. Ageist attitudes are detrimental to the well-being and even the productivity of our society: policies need to be based on skills and ability to contribute.
- Seniors do more than just receive. They contribute to the public purse through personal income taxes, consumer taxes, and their investments in businesses and public enterprises.

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In short, the challenge for public policy makers is to look at the entire social and economic situation and anticipate the effects of their actions on every aspect of human activity.



## Public support strengthens private support

For many seniors, involvement in community activities—not only social or recreational events but also volunteer efforts such as delivering meals on wheels to other seniors and helping school-aged children learn new skills—has a major, positive impact on their own well-being and that of others. This contributes to reducing health and social services costs. In the past, governments have contributed to funding these activities. The result: many benefits and services for individuals and organizations and for the public and private sectors.

Unfortunately, funding cuts are endangering past gains. There is a pressing need for new strategies to support this type of senior empowerment, reduce isolation, and encourage social connection.

Governments also have a crucial role in maintaining and strengthening exchanges between generations. When society assumes collective responsibility for meeting seniors' needs through health care, extended care or pension benefits, it also relieves the children and families of a burden that would be too heavy for them to carry alone.

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Contrary to popular belief, public support does not make people less committed to their families. The government trend toward withdrawal could represent a setback to family and community solidarity and partially or totally cancel out the expected savings.

## Maintaining social commitment

With longer lives, better health and earlier retirement, how will seniors remain socially involved?

NACA sees this as a shared responsibility: society should offer its older members an opportunity to play a true social role, and older adults should ask themselves how they can maintain their level of social commitment.

As the population ages, we'll need to think more flexibly about breaking down the rigid distinctions between the various stages of life—education, work, retirement. Attitudes and practices that make it difficult for older adults to contribute to society through paid and unpaid activity have other effects as well: eroding individual dignity and undermining individual and social prosperity.



## Filling the knowledge gap

Research has already created a good knowledge base for developing policies to deal with an aging population. But there are still some gaps, and better efforts are needed to transfer this knowledge to policy makers.

For example, we need a better understanding of

- the links between health and the environmental, social and economic conditions of individuals,
- how intervention can improve health throughout the life course,
- what makes people vulnerable to disease and disability, what kinds of support are needed and when,
- the effectiveness of various incentives in influencing people's choices about work, education, family, savings, and retirement planning.

## Intersectoral approach

Canadians' health can be enhanced by improving the economic, social and environmental conditions that determine health.

Since 1991 NACA has advocated aging policies that involve all these sectors. Federal, provincial and territorial governments are starting to recognize this and reflect it in their decisions.

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In health care, for example, other services—such as housing and social support—will need to complement and supplement health services.

Decision makers in other sectors—employers, unions, community groups—have important roles too, because of the connections between health and education, work history and family conditions.

A significant step toward this “intersectoral” approach is the National Framework on Aging, adopted by federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for seniors to guide policy and program development.



# A CALL FOR ACTION

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**E**ach player has a role in meeting the challenges of an aging society. *1999 and Beyond* looks at the roles of several partners—the individual, the family, the community (the voluntary and private sectors), and the State. Some partners' ability to play their role depends greatly on support from the other partners. Some actions involve specific partners and sectors, but others demand intersectoral action.

## The State

Federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments create frameworks that facilitate action by individuals, families and communities.

For example, governments are responsible for

- maintaining a public pension plan, which is the only guarantee of minimal financial well-being for many,
- reinforcing and encouraging solidarity between individuals, families and generations, for example, by offering support to informal caregivers and providing financial assistance to community organizations,
- planning to meet the needs of an aging population, for instance by providing senior-friendly public transportation, ensuring appropriate lighting and signage, increasing adapted public housing, encouraging universal design principles and

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standards (all measures that also benefit the rest of the community), and

- creating the conditions in which health and social services can adjust and respond to the evolving needs of the aging population. For example, institutional care needs to be based on residents' needs rather than on organizational requirements.

## The community

The business community and industry have important roles, both as entrepreneurs and as corporate citizens. For instance,

- Retailers and service businesses will have to adjust to an aging clientele, providing services and products that reflect the needs of seniors.
- Real estate developers and architects must ensure that new housing is universal in design—suitable for people of all ages and varying abilities.
- The pharmaceutical industry must assess the effects and efficacy of drugs used by seniors more precisely.
- Manufacturers will have to adapt products, packaging and labels.
- In the workplace, private sector labour policies could be more family-friendly—recognizing that employees have family responsibilities toward children and older parents and family members.

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- Training and learning for all workers will help refresh motivation, improve skills and support success in working life and in retirement.



## Individuals and families

Since health, adequate income and being part of a social network are important contributors to aging well, individuals must, to the extent they can, stay physically and mentally fit, manage their own affairs wisely, and stay socially involved.

But if individuals are to avoid illness, financial problems, and social isolation, they have to be in a position to make choices—and all of us have a role in making sure that choices are available and that people have the knowledge to make informed decisions.

## 1999 and Beyond

These are only a few of the challenges of an aging society. The full report, entitled *1999 and Beyond / Challenges of an Aging Canadian Society* looks at these and many other issues and challenges through six thematic chapters:

- **Diversity of Seniors** looks at how factors such as gender, ethnicity and place of residence affect seniors' situation.

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- **Health and Well-being** covers a full range of physical and mental health issues, from diseases and falls to abuse and medication use.
  - **Maintaining Autonomy** considers how housing, transportation, home care and other supports affect seniors' ability to remain independent, and also looks at the ethical issues involved.
  - **Financial Security** examines public and private arrangements for assuring income after retirement.
  - **Work and Transition to Retirement** looks at a range of issues related to paid and unpaid activities and lifelong learning.
  - **Intergenerational Issues** suggests how to develop a more complete and balanced picture of the contributions of each generation to the prosperity of our economy and the quality of life in Canadian society.

The report also suggests markers for measuring the development of Canadian society and our success in meeting the challenges. Decision makers in the private, public, voluntary and academic sectors can use the report to guide strategic planning and research.

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NACA's goal: concrete actions to support the independence and well-being of today's and tomorrow's seniors. With good leadership, and with commitment and involvement from all sectors, Canada will continue to evolve as a caring society for all ages.