Health and Support Needs of Older Canadians

Research Findings & Implications

Are older Canadians getting healthier?
Who gets help when it's needed?

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Background

Home support networks include formal sources (paid employee(s) or volunteer(s) from a private or public agency), informal sources (family, friends and/or neighbours) and "mixed" sources (combinations of formal and informal support). As Canadians age, they are more likely to require assistance with health-related tasks due to a long-term health condition or disability (Chen & Wilkins, 1998). As the first of the Boomers reach age 65 in 2011, it is of great interest to identify trends in their levels of disability and use of home support networks, to better predict future needs and resources within community care.

How we did the research

Health of older Canadians was measured by trends in levels of disability. NPHS and CCHS data were used to estimate changes in disability and the characteristics associated with different levels of disability. This research used a sub-sample of respondents age 65 and older living in private households. Their levels of disability (no, mild, moderate or severe disability) were established by the highest level declared in one of the following dimensions: *mobility* (ability to get around); *dexterity* (use of hands and fingers); *cognition* (memory and thinking); *vision*; and *pain and discomfort*. The GSS data were used to estimate the socio-demographic characteristics of older Canadians' use of formal and/or informal support networks.

Figure 1: Distribution (%) of disabled Canadians aged 65 and older living in private households by severity levels, 1994/95 to 2000/01.
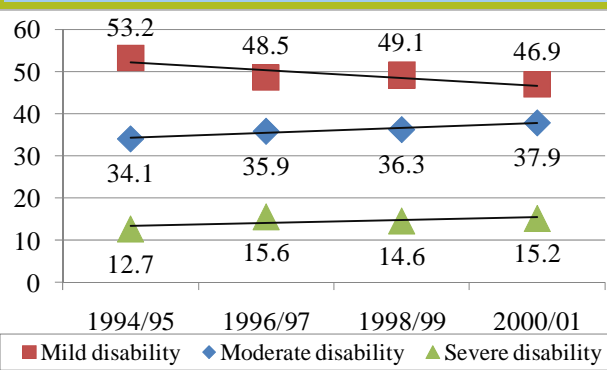
Data Sources

This study analyzed data from five Statistics Canada national datasets: the 1994/95, 1996/97, and 1998/99 National Population Health Survey (NPHS), the 2000/01 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), and the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS).

Key Findings

Are older Canadians getting healthier?

- Nearly 1/3 of Canadians 65 and over were disabled between 1994/95 and 2000/01, with nearly half of these reporting mild disability. While the global disability rate decreased over time, the level of severity increased. Indeed, moderate disability assumed more importance, while mild disability decreased. This suggests that disabilities tend to appear later, but seem to be more severe.
- The overall decrease in disability mitigates the impact of aging on the number of disabled people, but is not strong enough to offset its effect. In other words, there will be more disabled older people simply because the elderly population increases, even if this effect is lessened somewhat by a decrease in overall disability rates.
- There is no significant trend in levels of disability over time, when controlling for socio-demographic variables and these variables are not significantly related to level of disability. However, the results indicate that disability rates are stable over time (e.g., no improvement or worsening of morbidity).

Who gets help when it's needed?

- The likelihood of needing assistance increases with age and among women, and is strongly correlated to the level of disability.
- The characteristics associated with older Canadians' receipt of assistance are age, region of residence, and disability level, while more educated individuals are somewhat less likely to receive help.
- The probability of receiving formal assistance increases with age, education level and living alone. The probability of receiving assistance from both formal and informal sources increases with higher disability levels, whereas the probability of receiving "formal only" decreases.

Upcoming research

This research forms the basis for a second study that projects future support needs of older Canadians, specifically, who will provide support, and how much support will be provided in terms of weekly hours of assistance.

Conclusion

The trends in the global disability rate and the levels of severity between 1994/95 and 2000/01 that were observed in the descriptive analyses were not significant, when controlling for socio-demographic variables. In other words, morbidity neither decreased nor increased, but remained stable over time.

Characteristics associated with need and receipt of assistance include age, living arrangement, education and disability level. Given the inevitable impact of population aging on the increasing need for home support human resources, it is important to work on developing comprehensive measures to quantify the need for future home care services.

Implications

- If the decrease in mild disability and the increase in moderate disability holds true in the future, there may be an increase in the intensity of assistance needed by older people.
- How older Canadians use formal and informal support networks is likely to change as the socio-demographic characteristics of tomorrow's older people will differ from those of today. The increasing volume of older people will require more informal and formal support.
- Canada will need to prepare for the future home care needs of its aging population. In addition to requiring more formal caregivers, these workers will need to be trained to work with much older adults and greater levels of disability.
- Current challenges with survey data must be redressed in the future, in order to understand disability trends in Canada.

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