

Gender differences in family/friend caregiving in Canada

Summary

Family/friend caregivers comprise the backbone of the Canadian health care system. They provide 70-80% of care to individuals with a chronic health problem or disability at an estimated value of \$25-26 billion annually. For those who develop policies and programs to support the family/friend care sector, it is critical to understand the characteristics of current family/friend caregivers. Using data from Statistics Canada's 2007 General Social Survey (GSS) on family, social support, and retirement, we describe the characteristics of family/friend caregivers age 45 and older in Canada. We find that:

- Over the past five years, the *proportion* of Canadians over age 45 who are caregivers has grown by nearly 10%, but their *numbers* have increased by 65%! In 2007, 28.9% or 3.8M Canadians aged 45 or older provided assistance to someone with a long term health condition or physical limitation, increasing substantially from 19.5%, or nearly 2.2M, in 2002.
- A higher proportion of family/friend caregivers age 45+ are women (56.5%) than men (43.5%). Women caregivers spend significantly more time than men providing care—the equivalent of 1½ work days per week on average for women compared to one full day per week for men.
- Nearly half of all family/friend caregivers aged 45+ are aged 45-54, yet ¼ are 65 or older. The majority are married or living in common-law relationships and have completed post secondary education.
- Family/friend caregivers often care for more than one person at a time. While close to 60% provided care to only one person, 40% provided care to two or more individuals in addition to their other responsibilities, such as employment and child rearing.
- Most were caring for close kin, especially parents or parents-in-law, but nearly ¼ were caring for friends or neighbours.
- More than two-thirds care for people who have a physical disability only, but 1 in 5 care for those with a much more complex combination of physical and cognitive/mental disabilities. More than half care for elders over 75 years.
- Most family/friend caregivers assist people living in the community, but more than 15% assist one or more persons living in a residential care setting or supportive housing.
- While most family/friend caregivers live in the same community (63%) or building (20%) as the primary person they care for, 1 in 7 lives at a distance of a half-day or more drive away.
- Most (80%) men and women help with transportation and errands, but more women than men provide emotional support, indoor domestic tasks, care management, personal care and medical treatment, whereas more men than women help with house maintenance and outdoor work.





Family and friend caregivers comprise the backbone of the Canadian health care system, providing 70-80% of care to individuals with chronic health problems or disabilities at an estimated value of more than \$25-26 billion annually¹. Clearly, family/friend caregiving is an important issue that will become even more prominent in the future. While the majority of older adults are healthy, by age 75 one in ten need someone else to help with personal care². Since the oldest-old age groups are those that are growing fastest, an increased demand for family/friend care is likely.

Given the central role that family/friend caregivers already play in the health care system and the increased demand anticipated in the future, we need to understand who comprises family/friend caregivers to inform policies that will help ensure the sustainability of the family/friend care sector.

Research objectives

- To describe the characteristics of family/friend caregivers in Canada
- To identify differences between women (W) and men (M) family/friend caregivers and the care they provide.

Data source

We analyzed data from Statistics Canada's 2007 General Social Survey (GSS) on family, social support, and retirement. From the total sample of 23,404 respondents aged 45 and older, we drew a sub-sample of 6,742 people who had provided unpaid care to someone with a long-term health condition or physical limitation during the 12 months prior to the survey. Care includes assistance with one or more of:

- **indoor domestic tasks** (meal prep and clean-up, house cleaning, laundry, sewing)
- **household maintenance or outdoor work**
- **transportation and errands** (driving, shopping, banking, paying bills)
- **personal care** (bathing, toileting, brushing teeth, dressing, hair or nail care)

- **medical treatments or procedures**
- **care management** (scheduling or coordinating care tasks, making appointments, managing finances); and
- **emotional support.**

Note that those only providing emotional support are not included in the population of caregivers examined in the rest of this policy brief.

Analysis

We report proportions and averages to describe the characteristics of individuals providing care to family members or friends. Data were weighted to ensure that the findings are representative of the Canadian population. All analyses were split by gender.

Prevalence of family/friend caregivers is increasing

Over the past five years, the *proportion* of Canadian caregivers over the age of 45 has increased by 10%, yet the *number* of family/friend caregivers has grown by a whopping 65%. In 2002, nearly 1 in 5 Canadians (19.5%), or 2.3 million individuals, were providing care to a family member or friend with a chronic health problem. By 2007, that number had climbed to more than 1 in 4 (28.9%), or 3.8 million Canadians, an increase of nearly 1.5M family/friend caregivers in just 5 years.

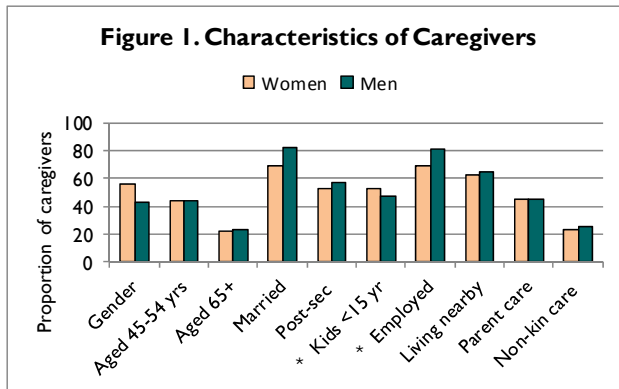
While these statistics are based on surveys of people aged 45 years and older, in 1996 we found that nearly half of family/friend caregivers were younger than 44 years. Thus, the current 3.8M caregivers in Canada may be only half the total number of people in Canada who are providing family/friend care.

Caregivers are typical Canadians

At first glance, family/friend caregivers appear to be regular folk. As shown in Figure 1, of all family/friend caregivers aged 45 and older in Canada, nearly half are aged 45-54 (W 44.1%; M 44.3%), yet ¼ are aged 65 or older (W 22.5%; M 23.1%). The majority are married or living in common-law relationships (W 69.4%; M 82.8%), without children under 15 years (W 89.9%; M 85.5%), and have completed post-secondary education (W 53.2%; M 57.7%). More caregivers are women (56.5%) than men (43.5%).



Figure 1. Characteristics of Caregivers



* % of caregivers 45-64

Caring extends beyond family ties

Almost half of caregivers 45+ cared for their parent or parent-in-law (W 45.0%; M 45.1%). But caregiving extended to other family members as well: spouses (W 9.9%; M 11%), siblings (W 8.6%; M 7.5%), children (W 7.1%; M 4.1%), and distant kin (W 4.6%; M 4.4%).

However, family/friend caregivers are not only caring for kin. About ¼ were supporting a close friend or neighbour (W 22.9%; M 25.3%), reflecting the importance of these other social ties.

Half of caregivers care for people aged 75+

It is not surprising that over 70% of family/friend caregivers provide care to adults aged 65 or older since half the caregivers 45+ cared for their parents. More than half assisted people 75 years and older (W 58.0%; M 54.8%) while nearly 15% assisted those aged 65-74 (W 14.8%; M 16.2%). About 20% of caregivers assisted middle-aged adults 45-64 (W 18.1%; M 21.1%). Few family/friend caregivers cared for people under 44 years of age.

The majority of caregivers helped individuals who had a physical disability only (W 68.4%; M 74.1%), although approximately 20% assisted someone with a much more complex combination of both physical and cognitive/mental disabilities (W 23.9%; M 19.7%). Less than 10% cared for someone with cognitive/mental disabilities only.

Most caregivers provide care to those living nearby

The vast majority of caregivers (81%) reported caring for someone who lived in a private household. Two-thirds (W 62.7%; M 64.9%) lived in the same neighbourhood or community as the primary person they cared for and 20% lived in the same home.

But 1 in 7 provide care across distances

Some caregivers provide support across distances. One in 10 family/friend caregivers 45+ care for individuals who live within a half day's drive. One in 20 travel more than a half day to provide care. Commuting time is not included in data on time spent on care tasks, adding to the care demands and financial cost of caregiving.

Caregiving continues to people living in facilities

Individuals living in residential care facilities continue to receive care from family members and friends. More than 10% of family/friend caregivers reported assisting someone living in a residential care facility, and more than 6% cared for someone living in supportive housing. This finding dispels a common myth that family members and friends abandon their loved ones to institutions and the paid staff who work there.

Caregivers have multiple demands on their time

Family/friend caregivers often juggle several roles: that of employee, parent and caregiver. Of all family/friend caregivers of employment age (45-64 years), 2.2 million caregivers were employed (W 70.7%; M 81.8%) and half were raising children under the age of 15 (W 53.1%; M 46.9%), sandwiched between caring for young children and an adult with long term health problems at the same time.

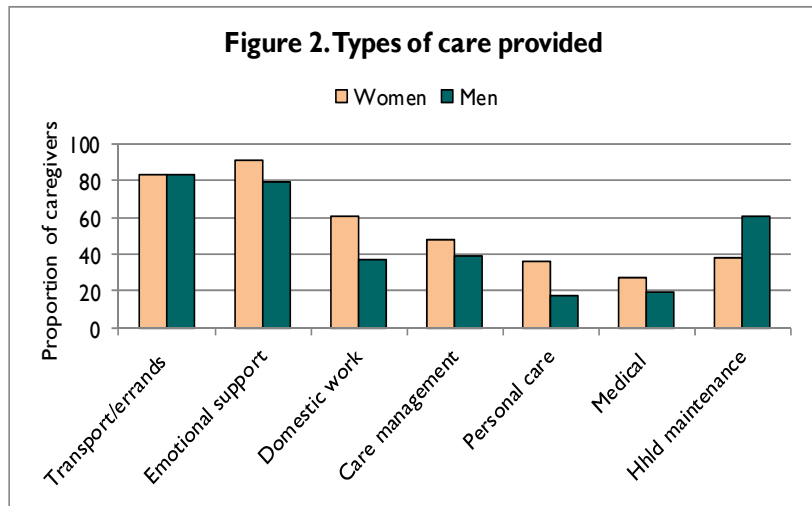
Family/friend caregivers also had multiple caregiver roles, caring for more than one person on average (W 1.69, M 1.75). While about 60% provided care to only one person (W 63.1%; M 59.6%), nearly 40% cared for two or more people: 30% cared for 2 or 3 people (W 30.7%; M 33.7%) and 6% cared for 4 or more people (W 6.2%; M 6.7%).



Women spend more time providing care than men

Women caregivers 45+ spend significantly more time than their male counterparts providing care to their main care receiver —11.9 hours per week on average compared to 7.4 hours per week³ — the equivalent of 1½ work days per week for women compared to one full day per week for men.

One third of women caregivers aged 45+ provide care for 10 or more hours per week as do almost one quarter of men caregivers.



Women and men provide different kinds of care

Most women and men caregivers 45+ help with transportation and errands (W 83.2%; M 83.7%). However, when we look more closely at other types of care tasks, we see that women and men provide different kinds of care (see Figure 2). Significantly more women than men provide emotional support (W 91.2%; M 37.5%), assistance with indoor domestic tasks (W 60.9%; M 37.5%), care management (W 48.3%; M 39.3%), personal care (W 36.3%; M 17.3%), and medical treatments and procedures (W 27.5%; M 18.9%). These tasks are less flexible with respect to timing and harder to fit into already busy lives. In contrast, more men than women help with household maintenance and outdoor work (W 38.3%; M 60.3%), tasks that likely offer more flexible scheduling.

	Women	Men
Mean number of care receivers	1.69	1.75
Mean hrs/wk spent caregiving	11.9	7.4

¹ Hollander, M.J., Liu, G., & Chappell, N.L. (2009). Who care and how much? The imputed economic contribution to the Canadian healthcare system of middle-aged and older unpaid caregivers providing care to the elderly. *Healthcare Quarterly*, 12(2), 42-49.

² Turcotte, M. & Schellenberg, G. (2007). *Portrait of seniors in Canada*. Ottawa ON: Ministry of Industry.

³ Hours of care relate only to one care recipient.

Next Steps

This policy brief describes the characteristics of Canadian family/friend caregivers. In the next policy brief on caregiving, we will examine employed caregivers more closely to determine the impact caregiving has on their employment and risk of negative economic costs.

About the Policy Brief

Funding provided by the Population Change and Lifecourse Strategic Knowledge Cluster and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. Views expressed are solely those of authors: Janet Fast (PI), Karen Duncan, Chelsea Dunlop, Jacque Eales, Norah Keating, Donna Lero, and Satomi Yoshino.

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