

Disabilities Demographics

Waterloo Region Trends Research Project, March 2001

"Having a disability is no more of a tragedy than having green eyes. What is a tragedy is the lack of sensitivity, awareness and knowledge that [people with disabilities] encounter, and the physical, psychological and social barriers that result." [1] Indeed, the most difficult challenges that people with disabilities face might be the barriers that our society has put up - possibly attitudes, lack of appropriate services or support, alienation, physically difficult environments, or any number of other barriers.

This paper, which explores the demographics of disabilities in Waterloo Region and introduces some of the breadth of the issue, is part of an effort to build a better understanding of disabilities. Through improved understanding it is hoped that we can together build better choices and a more accessible and caring community so that everyone can participate equally.

Future issue papers will address other facets of disabilities and some of the many topics that are tied to it such as accessible, supportive, and affordable housing, or adequate transportation.

Definition of Disability

The World Health Organization defines disability as "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (1980).

Statistics Canada has put this into practice by defining disability "in terms of difficulties in performing routine tasks of daily living such as walking, climbing stairs, feeding oneself, or reading a newspaper" [2] due to a long-term physical condition, mental condition, or health problem. [3] (Individuals were not considered disabled if they used a technical aid that completely eliminated the limitation.)

A disability might be obvious such as one that causes a person to use a wheelchair or some other aid, or the disability might be largely invisible like some mental health conditions. A disability can be from birth, an accident, a health condition, or may come naturally because of aging. However, regardless of the type, or cause, or severity of a disability, it is important to remember that people with disabilities are people first. The disability does not define the person but only describes a part of their living situation - some of the challenges that they might face in the course of their life, and a piece of what might have made them stronger.

Overall Disability Rates

In Canada, 15.5% [4] of the total population [5] had a disability in 1991 [6] - including both those living in households and in health-related institutions. Approximately 1 in 6 people have a disability.

If the Canadian rate of disability was used for our region with a population of 455,100 [7] there would be approximately 70,541 individuals with a disability in Waterloo Region.

Of Canadians between the ages of 15 and 64 with disabilities, 2.1% lived in an institution such as nursing homes, residences for senior citizens, hospitals, psychiatric institutions, treatment centres, and institutions for the physically handicapped. This increases to 14.7% for seniors who have disabilities.

Severity and Nature of Disabilities

Almost half (47.1% or 11,750) of working age adults [8] (between 15 and 64 years of age) with disabilities in the Waterloo Region Area [9] reported having a mild level of disability. More than one in three (39.5% or 9,850) reported a moderate level of disability. A severe level of disability was reported by 13.4% (3,340) of adults with disabilities. The severity scale developed for this Health and Activity Limitation Survey was based on whether a person had partial or complete loss of function in one or several areas of daily living.

People in older age groups tend to have more severe disabilities than younger people. This is especially dramatic in the older seniors age groups. [10]

The level of working age adults with what Statistics Canada termed mild disabilities in the Waterloo Region Area (47.1%) was lower than that rate for Canada as a whole (54.4%). The level of people with moderate disabilities was higher in the Waterloo Region Area (39.5%) than for Canada (31.6%), while the level of severe disabilities reported was similar for both geographies (13.4% in the Waterloo Region Area, and 14.1% in Canada).

Mobility and agility disabilities were the most common types of disabilities in the Waterloo Region Area. Among the working age population with disabilities, 57.0% (14,225) had mobility disabilities and were limited in their ability to walk, move from room to room, carry an object for 10 metres, or stand for long periods. Also among the working age population in the Waterloo Region Area, 55.5% (13,835) had agility disabilities; these were defined as being limited in the ability to bend, dress, or undress oneself, get in and out of bed, cut toenails, use one's fingers to grasp or handle objects, and reach or cut one's own food.

More than one in four of working age adults with disabilities had an intellectual disability, mental health condition or learning disability (29.2% or 7,285), which was included in the category "Other" on the survey. A similar percentage was limited in hearing (28.4% or 7,075). There were 8.0% (1,985) of adults with disabilities that had speaking limitations, and 4.3% (1,060) had seeing limitations [11].

Age and Disabilities

The likelihood of having a disability increases with age. In 1991 across Canada, 7.0% of children (14 years or younger) had a disability as compared to 12.9% of working age adults (aged 15-64), and 46.3% of seniors (aged 65 and older).

The increase in the disability rate is especially striking for seniors. Of the total population of Canada 54 years and younger, 9.8% have a disability and this percentage increases to 27.1% for those between 55 and 64 years. Among seniors aged 65 to 74, the rate of disability is 36.9%, rising to 56.8% for those between 75 and 85 years, and to 83.8% for people older than 85 years of age.

Source Statistics Canada, 1991 Health & Activity Limitation Survey
Processed by Waterloo Region Trends Research Project

Women tend to live longer than men resulting in more women in the older age groups with higher disability rates. In part because of this, the rate of disability for senior women (48.4%) is higher than the rate for men (43.4%) in Canada, and of people with disabilities there are approximately three senior women for every two senior men.

Demographic Projections

The fact that disability rates increase as Canadians get older means that disabilities will be even more prevalent as our population ages. David Foot, the demographer and author of the book, *Boom, Bust, & Echo* (1996), notes that as the baby boomers, the larger-than-normal group of people born just after World War II, approach their older years our population as a whole will get older. In 2002, the first of the Canadian baby boomers will start to enter the 55 to 64 age group where there is a jump to a disability rate of 27.1%. In subsequent years that same large age cohort will be moving into the older age groups in which 56.8% (75-84 year age group) or 83.8% (older than 85 years) of people might have disabilities.

As more and more people move into age groups which have higher disability rates, the total number of people with disabilities will continue to increase over the next few decades. The aging of our population will likely cause the percentage of the total population that has disabilities to rise from 15.5% in 1991 to a possible 20.8% in 2026. [12]

The increase in the number and percentage of people with disabilities in their working years will have profound implications for the design of workplaces, work design and accommodations, and many more areas. According to Statistics Canada, "persons with work disabilities [15 to 64 year old age group] in Canada will increase from 1.4 million in 1993 to between 1.9 million and 2.1 million by 2016. The average annual growth rates of the population with work disabilities will be growing faster than the population without work disabilities." [13]

There doesn't appear to be agreement about whether the prevalence of disability (or the probability that someone of a certain age will have a disability) is increasing or decreasing. "Some analysts have argued that the recent decline in mortality has been associated with similar improvements in morbidity [health] and disability, while others hold the opposite view, by arguing that the recent mortality decline has resulted from the prolongation of the lives of people with disease or disabilities." [14]

Connections to Other Issues

Disabilities are interconnected with many other issues - often making every-day activities or daily living much more complex and difficult. Below is a starting point for some of the more obvious connections to living with disabilities. This could also be seen as a beginning list of areas for further research to build local understanding. Some of the first few of these issues are planned as future issue papers in this series.

universal design (barrier-free building design)

housing

transportation

income & poverty issues

(see also the October 2000 issue paper about poverty and disabilities by the Urban Poverty Consortium)

seniors and aging

isolation & participation

family & community support; independent living

causes of disabilities

technological innovation

recreation, arts, and culture

acceptance and discrimination

successful local stories and partnerships

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For more information about disability issues and local resources, help with individual difficulties, or peer support, please contact

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The Independent Living Centre of Waterloo Region is an organization that facilitates individual growth towards greater independence, creates opportunities to make informed choices, and assists in the removal of barriers to full participation.

For more information about social policy issues and data, for a list of other issue papers in the Waterloo Region Trends Research Project, or other work of the Social Planning Councils in the Waterloo Region, contact either Social Planning Council

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Endnotes

This quote [sic] by Pat Danforth is from, "Women with Disabilities" in The Healthsharing Book Resources for Canadian Women, (1985) by Kathleen McDonnell and Mariana Viverde, eds. published by Women's Press, Toronto, pp. 180-181. « Refer to the 1990 Statistics Canada publication, A Profile of Three Disabled Populations, by Gary Cohen. « Refer to the Statistics Canada 1996 Census Dictionary for these definitions. « Statistics Canada asked a question about activity limitation (disabilities) in the 1996 Census. They found that only 10.0% of the population had a disability whereas the Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS) found a disability rate of 15.5%. Because the census did not include institutional residents that have a higher-than-normal disability rate, and HALS had more specific questions to determine if a person had a disability, the HALS data reporting a rate of 15.5% is considered more reliable. «

These overall disability rates include both persons living in households and in institutions. «

Unless otherwise stated, all data are from the 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS) and reflect 1991 data. Although this is not a current data source, it is the most recent reliable data available and we have assumed it to be an approximation of the current situation, while providing a baseline for future comparison. Statistics Canada intends to update HALS in 2001, and release that data in 2003. «

The Regional Planning Department (Planning Information Bulletin, March 7, 2000) had projected that in January 2001 the population of Waterloo Region (including students) would be 455,100 based on 1996 Statistics Canada figures. «

Beyond national overall disability rates and national age distribution for people with disabilities, all other numbers and rates in this paper only refer to persons living in households and not those living in institutions. «

This data is reported for the Kitchener CMA (Census Metropolitan Area), which comprises the City of Cambridge, the City of Kitchener, the Township of North Dumfries, the City of Waterloo, and the Township of Woolwich. It is similar in scope to Waterloo Region but does not include Wilmot and Wellesley Townships. For the purposes of this paper, the "Waterloo Region Area" is used to refer to the Kitchener CMA. «

Refer to the 1990 Statistics Canada publication, *Barriers Confronting Seniors With Disabilities in Canada*, by Peter Dunn, with 1986 HALS data. «

For more information about data, definitions, or references in this paper please contact one of the Social Planning Councils listed here. «

These calculations are rough approximations using Statistics Canada population projections and the basic methodology of David Foot, author of the book, *Boom Bust & Echo* (1996). «

Refer to the Statistics Canada publication, *Projections of Persons with Disabilities (Limited at Work/Perception), Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1993-2016* (1996) by Jean-Francois Michaud, M. V. George, and S. Loh, p. 6. «

Michaud, et al. (1996), p. 28, citing E.M. Crimmins, Y. Saito, and D. Ingegneri (1989). "Changes in Life Expectancy and Disability-Free Life Expectancy in the United States." *Population and Development Review*, 15, No. 2. «