

International Handbook of Population Aging

edited by Peter Uhlenberg
Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2009
ISBN: 978-1402083563
Hardcover \$339.00; 769 pp.

Reviewed by Roderic Beaujot
University of Western Ontario
rbeaujot@uwo.ca

It is remarkable, as Peter Uhlenberg observes in the opening lines of this edited collection, that *The Study of Population* (Hauser and Duncan 1959) had no chapter on aging, and the words “population aging” did not even appear in the index. In effect, the 1950s and early 1960s, as a baby boom period, was a time when some populations were getting younger rather than aging, and the concern related more to population growth. We learn from the chapter by Donald Rowland that the number of aged did not increase appreciably for sixty years or more after the start of the mortality decline, and that in pre-transition societies typically not more than 3 per cent of persons reached their 65th birthdays. How different has been the population change since the 1970s, and this marked contrast with past population patterns will only be accentuated in the coming decades.

Using the cut-off of 10 per cent aged 65+, and based only on countries with a million or more persons, there were 9 countries with older populations in 1950, compared to 26 in 1975, 41 in 2000, 64 in 2025, and 105 in 2050. In 2000, Canada is 31st in rank order from the oldest, but in 2025 Canada is 22nd on the list, with 20.7 per cent aged 65+ compared to 28.9 per cent in Japan as the oldest population.

This is a very comprehensive collection, with 34 chapters bringing a wealth of material to bear on the topic. While not present in every chapter, the themes of international comparisons and of life course provide further unity to the text, as does the strong historical context. From a policy perspective, the unifying element is that aging is not to be viewed as a crisis, but there are profound implications, both challenges and opportunities, and the considerations associated with the deep policy challenges (e.g., labour force renewal, social security, health costs) go much beyond the demographics. As an example, the cross-national comparisons of health care costs find little correlation with the proportion of the population that is aged 65 and over (p. 628).

The book is divided into seven parts. After a three-chapter overview, there are ten chapters covering countries or regions, chosen in part to represent differences in the onset and/or extent of aging, thus, from Southern Europe to West Africa and the Arab countries. This is followed by four chapters on migration and aging, then sections on economic issues (including pensions, social security, employment, retirement, and income inequality in later life), longevity/health (including active life expectancy, disability, and inequality), social relationships (childlessness, marital history, and gender). The book finishes with two chapters on the future of aging (prospects of human longevity, and the meaning of old age and retirement in an aging society).

Besides in the chapter “Population aging in Canada and the United States,” Canada makes it into several tables that provide comparative data, but textual reference to Canada appear only in three chapters besides the one mentioned above: global population aging, immigrants and aging, and replacement migration. Canada’s uniqueness, along with Australia, is in terms of the extent of the post-war baby boom and the level of international migration, which temper aging in comparison to other OECD countries, but the baby boom’s movement into later adult ages brings particularly rapid aging.

The life course perspective is useful in a number of areas, besides helping to identify sources of health and income inequality at older ages. For instance, while international migrants are mostly not old at the time of migration, they largely grow old in the country to which they immigrated. There is also good use of a life course perspective in the treatment of health/longevity, gender, childlessness, and marital status history. Thus, for instance, we note that childlessness was lowest in the cohorts born in the period 1920–40, which are exactly those now at older ages. We find that divorce affects women’s life chances more than men’s, but that widowhood is more detrimental to men. In the aggregate, the effect of divorce levels is more for the future than the present, as is the increased childlessness of post-war generations.

Let me note a couple of striking observations with regard to immigration. The chapter on Immigrants and Aging observes that two-thirds of newly admitted immigrants to the United States are family members, including older adults, while for Australia and Canada, two-thirds of new permanent residents are young, skilled, and educated labour migrants (p. 374). This chapter observes that “minorities are a much larger proportion of the U.S. population than the Canadian population” (p. 191), yet the adjoining tables show 81 per cent white in United States in 2000 and 82 per cent in Canada in 2001. The chapter “Replacement migration” expects immigrants to remain a part of deliberate policy in the United States, Canada, and Australia, but approached more cautiously than in the last quarter of the 20th century (p. 403).

In the chapter on Canada and the United States, Tracey LaPierre and Mary Hughes note many challenges, but they conclude that these can be overcome without reductions in standard of living of older adults or young-

er generations. The authors fail to observe that the younger generations have already been affected by having to pay more for the same Canada Pension Plan benefits. Our pay-as-you-go public health insurance will surely also involve an inter-generational transfer to the baby boom from the smaller generations that have followed. The authors may have been misled by the Canadian case, which has continued to benefit from the baby boom being at prime ages for labour force participation into the first decade of the 21st century. Thus, the old age dependency ratio (persons aged 65+ for every hundred persons aged 15–64) increased only from 14 to 18 between 1980 and 2000, while it will increase from 21 in 2010 to 38 in 2030 (p. 221). The standard of living of younger generations has already been affected by the labour market consequences of the size of the baby boom, and its longer stay in the labour force, blocking employment and mobility prospects for younger persons.

This is a comprehensive text and an important guide to the literature, with good historical depth and cross-national comparisons. But there is more focus on the United States case than is implied by the title. For comprehensive exam lists in Canada, I would recommend the introduction as well as Chapter 1 (How populations age), Chapter 3 (Global population aging: History and prospects), Chapter 10 (Population aging in Canada and the United States), Chapter 16 (Immigrants and aging), and Chapter 17 (Replacement migration).