

# Canada's latest baby boom caught experts by surprise — in part because our birth rate is declining <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

When Leslie Charlton opened up her baby gear and maternity goods shop a decade ago, Regina was a "barren wasteland," devoid of stores like hers. Now, Ms. Charlton's Groovy Mama shop is one of about seven shops selling breastfeeding bras and baby slings to a growing clientele.

She loves the competition; there's enough business to go around.

"There's still enough business for all because there seem to be a lot of people coming here and a lot of babies being born," she said of her city, which, became the fourth fastest growing city in the country this year.

Nearly four years ago, the Regina General Hospital opened the Rawlco Centre for Mother & Baby Care - a sparkling new unit designed to better accommodate a hospital that has seen a boost in births from 3,828 in 2011 to 4,133 in 2013, a 7.3% increase.

Where job prospects flow, infant cries are sure to follow. Between 2006 and 2011, Saskatchewan's population of little ones under age 4 grew by 19.6%, contributing to the province's exponential growth. Alberta saw a 20% increase.

But what the 2011 census revealed as a "baby boomlet" is proving to be an enduring pattern in Canadian communities coast to coast, regardless of economic health. For the first time in 50 years, this cohort grew in all provinces and territories, in Alberta by 20% and in Quebec by 17.5%, the census found. Demographers expect it will continue for a decade longer.

Even provinces with smaller increases and declining populations are feeling the somewhat unexpected boom: Last week, local media in New Brunswick reported a continued increase in kindergarten enrollment- 1,000 more children need kindergarten spots today than predicted a decade ago in a province known for its greying population. Some neighbourhoods in Toronto, such as East Danforth, have seen their under age-4 cohort grow nearly 49% between 2008 and 2011. Waiting lists for city run and private programs, not to mention child care are epic.

It amounts to a huge demand for not just childcare but infrastructure, and real estate to accommodate a new generation of families. In many cases businesses have been wise to the burst of little people, parents say.

But governments and bureaucracies have been much slower at the draw, raising questions of whether this phenomena crept up on them a little too fast, in part because it doesn't at all resemble any previous baby booms, particularly the post-war boom.

"It's a curiosity, I'll tell you," said Susan McDaniel, a demographer who holds the Canada Research Chair in Global Population and Life Course at the University of Lethbridge.

It's a curiosity because the birth rate in Canada is not going up - it's actually declined slightly to 1.61 children per woman of childbearing years in 2011 from 1.68 in 2008.

These are baby boomers' babies making babies, she said - people born from 1971 to 1991 becoming parents. The trend has moved toward people having their firstborns later in life, she said, but 23-year-olds are having babies too, making the cohort especially large. The difference from the post-war boom, she said, is people aren't having large families.

"What's happening is a bunch of them are having births within a 20-year period so that's why there are more babies. It's the same family size but more of them are having babies at the same time," she said. Immigration and intra-migration patterns, such as moving from province to province to find work, play a huge role too.

Maybe governments rely too much on birth-rate numbers to make policy decisions, Prof. McDaniel said. They could fret less about "whether the labour force is going to shrink in the future," she said, because it's not going to happen. There will be a convergence of those having children early in their childbearing years and late in them too - those on the earlier side will grow up and enter the labour force as most of the boomers retire.

"Demography's always much more complicated than birth rates and death," she said. "No one's paying attention to the younger side."

When one thinks about the aging population in Canada, a look east to the Maritimes is inevitable. But Claire LaBelle has seen two trends lately at the Greater Moncton Family Resource Centre she now runs and has worked at for 17 years: More and more families moving to bilingual Moncton to find work, and the age gap between younger parents and those in their 30s getting wider. Saint John has also seen a boost in its 0-4 set.

Demand for government-funded early years centres such as hers is always high, but it appears, with the movement of young families to cities, the pressure's getting stronger. Funding has not kept pace, she said - it's been the same for about 20 years.

Michael Haan, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Population and Social Policy at the University of New Brunswick, sees this sprout of youth in a largely greying group as hopeful, especially at a time of out-migration to more prosperous provinces.

"Here in New Brunswick - and this is true in other parts of Canada as well - we have more people that are of prime childbearing years than we did 10 years ago. What we're seeing is this slight bulge in the number of babies that are being born. Even though it's small, it's having consequences."

These are, of course, the childcare waiting lists to which major urban centres have long been accustomed. Projected enrollments in New Brunswick "missed the mark," he said. (New Brunswick's Ministry of Education said they calculate and project appropriate class sizes regularly and deny the increased enrollment need was "unexpected.")

"It's an urban phenomenon largely and not because there's something in the water in cities. It's because we have young people living in cities," he said, citing a roughly 50% split between rural and urban populations in New Brunswick.

In Toronto, Rebecca Brown has stopped bothering trying to sign her children up for city-run programs. The most-read item on her family activity listings website Bunchfamily.ca is a guide for how to register for said programs - it involves sharpening your elbows, waking up at an ungodly hour and being extremely prepared.

"It does create a bit of a great divide between organized parents and disorganized parents," she said. "I have embraced benign neglect as a philosophy out of necessity because I'm never going to be the parent who remembers you can only register for the gymnastic program everyone likes on this one day in February."

'Demography's always much more complicated than birth rates and death. No one's paying attention to the younger side'

But business has been quick to respond to community demand, she said. Toronto has seen an influx of baby and family-centric businesses; places like Smock Cafe, a "cozy cafe and art and craft oasis" in the west end of Toronto's Roncesvalles Village.

It's a demand Eleni Makrikostas has been trying to meet farther west in Etobicoke's lakeshore neighbourhood. Once known as a retirement community, its affordable single family homes and rising condos have attracted a number of young families in the past decade, shooting the 0-4 cohort up by 8% between 2006 and 2011 compared to 4% in Toronto.

She opened the Children's Urban Enrichment Studio two months ago and already has waiting lists for art programs that will begin in the fall - their themes yet undeclared. There are even children on standby right now, in case someone bows out of their Family Play Time slot.

Cities have long had a crunch for daycare spots and Vancouver is no different, says Sandra Menzer, executive director of the Vancouver Society of Children's Centres. Their wait lists have remained steady at about 2,000 children, but last year the City of Vancouver partnered with developers to open two new childcare centres to address growing demand for care amongst the sprouting condominiums - the same struggle Toronto is facing, as condos become the new starter family home.

"One of the challenges families face is that there simply isn't enough childcare and when they hear there's a wait list, they don't bother getting on it," she said. It's a matter of national concern, echoes Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

Emma Reilly McKay was lucky to get her son Duncan in a daycare of choice, especially in the baby boomtown that is Hamilton, Ont.

"You definitely get the sense there really is a baby boom," she said. It's helped her meet other moms who she calls her "text support," willing to field all manner of parenting questions.

This is the upside of the boomlet - it's helping parents build community, said Ann Elisabeth Samson, the editor of BabyCenter Canada, an online community for parents.

BabyCenter's recent survey of Millennial moms found a greater desire to have even bigger families than the generation before them, Ms. Samson said. If many of them make that happen, it'll only just fuel the baby boomlet further.

"When all of your friends are doing it and you're seeing it more in your community as something that can be done and you can continue to have fun and do the kind of work you want to do and have the relationships you want to have and having a baby too, the drive to reproduce is quite strong," she said.

Now if only we could all learn to tolerate more screaming babies in public.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** funding <sup>[4]</sup>

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