

# AGING ATLANTIC CITIES:

## CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR PLANNERS

### SUMMARY

With the 2016 Census, Canada reached a significant milestone: there are now more seniors in the country than children. In this article, we discuss how the issue of demographic change plays out in the Atlantic region. Not surprisingly, we found that the younger population is shrinking across the major cities in the region. However, Atlantic cities are still growing, many at an above-average rate. Some reasons for this type of change might be the smaller and less diverse economies, persistent high unemployment rates, and the small town appeal of many Atlantic communities for older, rather than younger, demographics.

### RÉSUMÉ

Le recensement de 2016 a permis au Canada de franchir une étape importante : il y a aujourd'hui plus d'âinés dans le pays que d'enfants. Dans cet article, nous analysons comment la question du changement démographique se répercute dans la région de l'Atlantique. Nous n'avons pas été surpris de constater que la population plus jeune recule dans les principales villes de cette région. Cependant, les villes dans la région de l'Atlantique continuent de croître, dont beaucoup à un taux supérieur à la moyenne. Diverses raisons expliquent ce changement, notamment les économies de petite taille et moins diversifiées, un taux de chômage qui demeure élevé, et l'attrait que les petites villes de la région de l'Atlantique exercent chez les âinés plutôt que chez les jeunes.

As the baby boomers reach retirement age and life spans continually increase, aging populations are a concern for many Canadian municipalities. Challenges such as health care provision, funding for social support programs, and income inequality are just a few of the issues our governments will need to address in the coming years. With the 2016 Census, Canada reached a significant milestone: there are now more seniors in Canada than children. In this article, we discuss how the issue of demographic change plays out in the Atlantic region, where a less competitive economy is the norm. Not surprisingly, we found that the younger population is shrinking across the major cities in the region. However, Atlantic cities are still growing, many at an above-average rate. There are number of ways planners could respond to this demographic shift in the future, but there are no simple solutions.

We used Census and National Household Survey data to examine demographic change in six Atlantic cities: Halifax, Charlottetown, St. John's, Moncton, Saint John, and Fredericton. This includes every city larger in population than Charlottetown from the provinces of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, and New Brunswick.

A census metropolitan area (CMA) or a census agglomeration (CA) is formed by one or more adjacent municipalities centred on a population centre (known as the core). A CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000 of which 50,000 or more must live in the core. A CA must have a core population of at least 10,000.<sup>1</sup> For the six largest Atlantic cities, Charlottetown and Fredericton are CAs while the others are large enough to be classified as CMAs.

We compare the changes in these cities to Canada as a whole, and to Toronto as the largest city in the country, with a very diverse economy that attracts workers of all ages (see **Table 1**). We used three measures: median age, working age population (aged 15-64) and young workers (aged 15-29). All data is from the 2006 and 2016 Censuses of Canada.<sup>2</sup>

In every Atlantic city, the median age has increased by more than 4.3 percent, the percentage increase for Canada as a whole (see **Table 2**). The largest percentage increases can be seen in Saint John, Fredericton, and Moncton, while Charlottetown and Halifax were on par with Toronto. As the largest Atlantic city, Halifax (population 403,390) has enough economic diversity to attract younger workers. Both Fredericton, with the highest population increase (18.0%), and Charlottetown with the second highest

**TABLE 1. THE POPULATION CHANGE IN SIX ATLANTIC CITIES FROM 2006-2016, WITH CANADA AND TORONTO AS REFERENCE POINTS.**

Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) / Census Agglomeration (CA)	Population 2006	Population 2016	Percent change
Halifax	372,860	403,390	8.2
Charlottetown	59,325	69,325	16.9
St. John's	181,115	205,955	13.7
Moncton	126,425	144,810	14.5
Saint John	122,385	126,200	3.1
Fredericton	86,230	101,760	18.0
Canada (ref)	31,612,895	35,151,725	11.2
Toronto (ref)	5,113,150	5,928,040	15.9



[16.9%] are attracting new residents, but their working age populations are shrinking.

In terms of the population who are of working age (those aged 15-64), we see correspondingly larger decreases in the Atlantic cities compared to the Canadian population as a whole. Compared to the national rate of a 0.8% increase, Moncton saw a 3.8% decrease in the percentage of working age men, the largest decrease of any Atlantic city (see **Table 3**). The gap between Atlantic cities and the national rate was not quite as large for women; in Moncton there was a 3.0% decrease compared to 2.0% decrease nationally (see **Table 4**). Halifax and Charlottetown saw the lowest decreases in the working age population for both men and women.

If we concentrate on the youngest workers (those aged 15-29 years old), we can see that there is some stability in Halifax, in which young workers represented about 21% of the total population from 2006 to 2016. The presence of four universities and several colleges likely has a buffering effect in Halifax. Every other Atlantic city saw larger decreases in the percentage of young workers than the country as a whole (see **Table 5**).

There are several likely reasons that the demographic changes we see in Atlantic cities are more extreme than those seen in the country as a whole. First, the economies of these cities are smaller and less diverse, making them less competitive to workers of all ages. In many Atlantic cities, the transition from a resource-based to service-based economy has been long and difficult. Every Atlantic province has had higher unemployment rates than the national average for forty years.<sup>3</sup> During economic downturns, this is exacerbated: for example, from 1991-1994, Canada's unemployment rate was between 10.3 and 11.4% annually, while the range for Newfoundland was 18.0 to 20.0%, for Prince Edward Island 16.5 to 17.5%, for Nova Scotia 12.1 to 14.3%, and for New Brunswick 12.7 to 13.0%. In boom times, such as 2016, the national unemployment rate was just 7.0%, but unemployment was almost double in Newfoundland (13.4%) and as high as 9.5% in New Brunswick.

Second, housing costs have driven Millennials to seek out alternatives to the raging single-family housing markets in and around large cities: Toronto has lost the highest number of young people since 1999-2000 and Vancouver has lost the most since



Halifax Waterfront Buildings in Nova Scotia

**TABLE 2 – MEDIAN AGE IN ATLANTIC CITIES, 2006-2016.**

Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) / Census Agglomeration	2006	2016	Percent change
Halifax	39.0	41.0	5.1
Charlottetown	40.0	42.0	5.0
St. John's	38.4	40.7	6.0
Moncton	39.4	42.1	6.9
Saint John	40.5	43.8	8.2
Fredericton	38.4	40.9	7.1
Canada	39.5	41.2	4.3
Toronto	37.5	39.4	5.1

**TABLE 3 – WORKING AGE POPULATION, MALE (AGED 15-64), 2006-2016.**

Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) / Census Agglomeration	2006	2016	Percent change
Halifax	72.3	69.8	-2.5
Charlottetown	69.4	66.6	-2.8
St. John's	72.7	69.7	-3.0
Moncton	71.4	67.6	-3.8
Saint John	69.1	66.3	-2.8
Fredericton	71.1	67.7	-3.4
Canada	69.3	67.1	0.8
Toronto	69.8	69.1	-0.7



**TABLE 4 – WORKING AGE POPULATION, FEMALE (AGED 15-64), 2006-2016.**

Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) / Census Agglomeration	2006	2016	Percent change
Halifax	71.3	68.9	-2.4
Charlottetown	68.3	65.8	-2.5
St. John's	72.1	69.1	-3.0
Moncton	69.3	66.3	-3.0
Saint John	68.2	65.2	-3.0
Fredericton	70.2	66.8	-3.4
Canada	68	66	-2.0
Toronto	69.3	68.7	-0.6

**TABLE 5 – YOUNG WORKERS (AGED 15-29).**

Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) / Census Agglomeration	2006	2016	Percent change
Halifax	21.0	20.5	-0.5
Charlottetown	20.5	19.1	-1.4
St. John's	21.7	19.5	-2.2
Moncton	20.5	17.7	-2.8
Saint John	18.9	17.1	-1.8
Fredericton	21.6	19.5	-2.1
Canada	19.6	18.6	-1.0
Toronto	20.2	20.3	0.1

the Great Recession.<sup>4</sup> Millennials seem to be drawn to smaller cities within close proximity to these larger urban centers. Atlantic cities, although more affordable than large centres, may not appeal to the younger demographic, who tend to prefer higher-density neighbourhoods with a variety of shops, services, and employment opportunities within walking distance.

Access to high-quality public transit service (i.e., with high frequencies, reliability measures such as GPS-enabled buses, and early/late services for shift workers) as well as options like car sharing, ride sharing and ride hailing are important for young workers, who typically drive to work at a much lower rate than other age groups. For example, 37.2% of those aged 15-24 used public transit, walking, and bicycle for their trip to work in Halifax in 2011.<sup>5</sup> This is more than double the combined non-driving mode share for those aged 65 and over (just 16.3% in 2011). Even a cursory look at the Atlantic cities reveals that young workers' transportation patterns are mismatched with small town services. None of the six cities has high-quality public transit service that would enable young workers to live car-free; most offer very limited service

evenings and weekends, making it difficult to travel without a car. Low densities in smaller cities, land use zoning that does not concentrate growth, and limited corridors and concentrated employment areas make it more difficult for traditional public transit vehicles to operate efficiently. Alternatives such as car sharing, ride sharing, and ride hailing may be more viable, as they operate well in low-density environments and are flexible enough to meet travel demands in off-peak time periods. There are car sharing services in Halifax, Charlottetown, St. John's, Moncton, and rideshare programs in Saint John and Fredericton. Opposition to ride-hailing company Uber has been strong: the company is not permitted to operate in Halifax and has avoided expansion to other Atlantic cities. Although it has been integrated in small cities in the US and Asia,<sup>6</sup> ride hailing is unlikely to find political support or a market base in small Canadian cities.

Third, small towns are appealing to aging demographics. Aging in place is the norm in Atlantic cities: a report from the World Health Organization states that seniors are generally pleased to be living in the Halifax Regional Municipality because

it offers "both a relaxed pace of life, and yet provides a variety of means for social participation."<sup>7</sup> In rural areas of Nova Scotia, such as Guysborough County, the slow pace of life, excellent local health care facilities and physicians, low volume of traffic, and relative lack of crime are factors that appeal to seniors.<sup>8</sup> This may explain why the populations of many Atlantic cities are increasing at a higher than average rate despite the loss of young workers.

Planners play a unique role in modifying the physical and social components of cities and regions as populations age. Non-traditional transit services such as car sharing, ride sharing, or route taxis make sense for both seniors and young workers, and could easily be integrated in smaller cities without traditional density-based transit services. The Rural Transportation Association operates door-to-door accessible services to 75% of the rural areas of Nova Scotia, supported by the Community Transportation Assistance Program, the Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program, community partnerships, and fundraising.<sup>9</sup> Municipalities could modify land use policies to support clustering of services such as health care and retail to decrease travel time and distance for residents in smaller centres. Eliminating some trips through online strategies, such as communicating with health professionals through social media instead of in-person appointments, is also possible; in fact, online health services are already being offered by some Canadian employers and by private companies.<sup>10</sup> This alternative would require community-based learning opportunities on social media and online tools/platforms for residents who are unfamiliar with them. Renovations and modifications to existing housing, including improved accessibility requirements to allow seniors to age in place, could be facilitated through an expansion of the existing federal/provincial funding programs. Co-housing programs, such as seniors' housing facilities allowing a few students to live with them and help with daily activities, are in place in other countries.<sup>11</sup>

Cities in the Atlantic region are aging at a faster pace than the Canadian average, and most have a declining percentage of young workers. There is more demographic stability in Halifax and, to some extent, Charlottetown. Aging will likely impact local economies, housing markets, and service provision in the future. *Macleans* reported



earlier this year that Canada is in better shape than most of its peers: the only other G7 country where seniors make up a lower share of the population than Canada is the United States.<sup>12</sup> Smaller cities in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Germany, all of which have higher shares of seniors than Canada, offer policy lessons for aging Atlantic cities and provinces. If planners want to adapt to aging communities, they need to radically re-think the low-density, two-car, single-family detached house norm.

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#### [Endnotes]

- <sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. (2015). *Census metropolitan area (CMA) and census agglomeration (CA)*. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/ref/dict/geo009-eng.cfm>. (Accessed June 13, 2017).
- <sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2017a). *Age and sex, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations*. 98-311-XC82011021 (2006 and 2011) and 98-400X2016001 (2011 and 2016).
- <sup>3</sup> Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency (NLSA). (2017). *Annual average unemployment rate: Canada and the provinces, 1976-2016*. Retrieved from <http://www.stats.gov.nl.ca/statistics/labour/pdf/unemprate.pdf> Accessed June 13, 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> Younglai, R. (2016). Priced out of urban housing markets, Millennials are scrambling for alternatives. *The Globe and Mail*. June 3, 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada. *Education and Labour: National Household Survey 2011 No. 99-012-X2011064*. Unfortunately, the 2016 Census data on the commute to work had not been released at the time of writing.
- <sup>6</sup> Ola, the first ride hailing company in the Asia-Pacific region, uses a lightweight website to help reach consumers with low-end smart phones in small towns and cities. In the US, a Pew Research Center study found that 21% of urbanites, 15% of suburbanites, and 3% of rural residents in the US had used ride-hailing services. The full report is entitled *Shared, Collaborative, and On Demand: The New Digital Economy* (wMay 19, 2016).
- <sup>7</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). (2007). *Age-friendly cities project: Halifax site. Summary report*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Seniors' Secretariat. [p9]
- <sup>8</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). (2008). *Age-Friendly Rural and Remote Communities Initiative: Guysborough County. Summary Report*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Seniors' Secretariat.
- <sup>9</sup> The website [www.ruralrides.ca](http://www.ruralrides.ca) connects users to services offered by 14 member organizations throughout Nova Scotia.
- <sup>10</sup> University of British Columbia employees have the option to consult a doctor through an online service called Medeo. Maple is a private online consultation platform. Similar services exist in the United States and The Netherlands.
- <sup>11</sup> Reed, C. (2015, April 5). Dutch nursing home offers rent-free housing to students. *PBS Newshour*. Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service.
- <sup>12</sup> Ciolfe, T. (2017, May 3). What the census tells us about Canada's aging population. *Macleans*. Retrieved from <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/what-the-census-tells-us-about-canadas-aging-population>. ■

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