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No Elixir of Youth:

Immigration Cannot Keep Canada Young

Yvan Guillemette
and William B.P. Robson

The Backgrounder in Brief

While Canadians have many reasons to welcome more immigrants, alleviating the economic and fiscal consequences of an aging population is not one of them. Policies to encourage work and saving, such as raising the retirement age, have greater power to contain the rise of old-age dependency.

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As a result of declining fertility and rising life expectancy, the Canadian population is growing older and the share of the population older than 65 is on the verge of a sharp rise. Projections based on current fertility rates, current immigration levels and moderately rising life expectancy show the ratio of the population age 65 and over to the population of traditional working age (18–64) rising from 20 percent in 2006 to 46 percent in 2050. There are many reasons to worry that an older and slower-growing population may make living standards rise more slowly in the future than they did in the past (Guillemette 2003). Certainly, the increase in age-related expenditures will put significant pressures on public finances (Robson 2003; 2006).

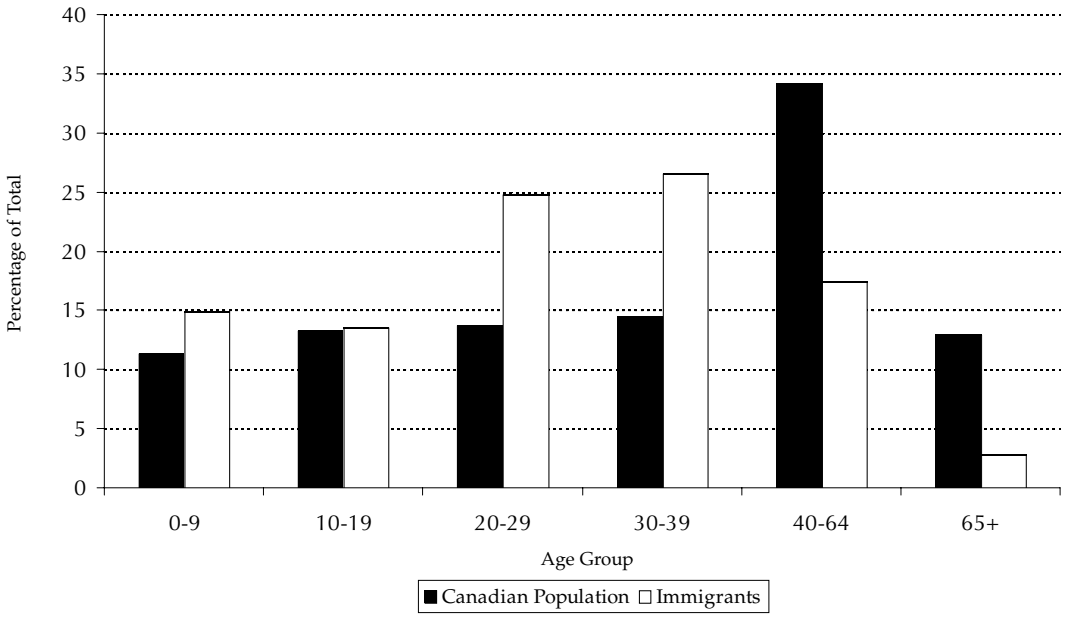
In thinking about this challenge, many Canadians look to immigration. Obviously, higher immigration can replace higher fertility to raise population numbers. But can higher immigration also replace higher fertility to halt or alleviate population aging? Demographic research has shown that a constant inflow of immigrants, even relatively young ones, does not necessarily rejuvenate low-fertility populations; in fact, it may in the long term actually contribute to population aging (Schmertmann 1992). Nevertheless, because immigration is easier to control than fertility, its appeal as an elixir of youth is obvious.

In late 2005, former federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Joe Volpe justified a prospective increase in immigration targets with reference to Canada's demographic needs. The increase Mr. Volpe proposed was large. From 1972 to 1986, Canada admitted 130,000 immigrants on average per year. The numbers then rose steadily, peaking at 267,000 in 1993. From 1994 to 2004, immigration averaged 220,000 a year, or 0.72 percent of the population. In 2005, it was 262,000, the equivalent of 0.81 percent of the population. Though not off the scale, these numbers are high by international standards: as a share of resident population, Canada's inflows put it in the top quarter of OECD countries, while the share of Canada's population born outside the country puts it in the top sixth of OECD countries (OECD 2005a; 2006). The minister's announced long-term objective was immigration equal to approximately 1 percent of the population. Today that would mean about 320,000 immigrants per year, a 45 percent increase over the average level of the past 10 years.

Would such an increase appreciably affect the future age structure of Canada's population? As we show in the pages that follow, the answer — perhaps surprisingly, considering the large numbers involved — is no. Although higher immigration can mitigate the imminent slowing down and reversal in labour-force growth, and can certainly meet specific labour-market shortages, no conceivable amount of immigration with an age profile such as Canada currently experiences can significantly affect the coming shift in the ratio of older to working-age Canadians.

A less discussed alternative, or complement, to raising immigration numbers would be to alter the age composition of the flow so that immigrants were, on average, younger than they are now. Our simulations demonstrate, however, that the age filter would have to be so extreme that even this morally dubious policy appears impractical: the number of young people Canada would need to attract is preposterously large, not only in relation to the country's absorptive capacity, but possibly even in relation to the number of potentially available immigrants.

Figure 1: *Age Distribution of Immigrants versus Canada's Current Population in 2004*



Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

Our conclusion is straightforward. Whatever the benefits of immigration to Canada's economy and society, and to immigrants themselves, immigration cannot relieve Canada of the challenges of an aging population. The need to encourage work and saving by an older population and to deliver pensions and healthcare efficiently and sustainably will be as pressing in a future of high immigration as it would be without it.

Two Strategies

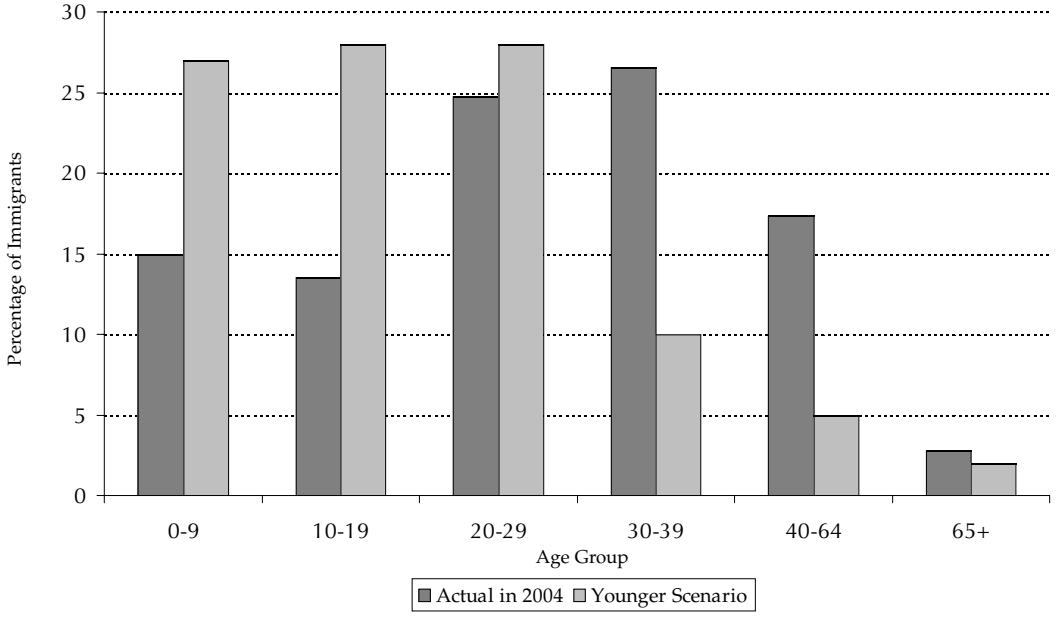
Immigration can influence the age structure of Canada's population through two main channels: its level, and its age structure.

The level matters because immigrants are, on average, younger than the resident population. Figure 1 illustrates the age structure of immigrants compared to that of Canada's entire population in 2004.[1] The tendency for immigrants to be younger is clear: more than 15 percent of immigrants are less than 10 years old when they arrive, and more immigrants are below the age of 20 than above the age of 40. In the short term, therefore, higher immigration would result in a lower average age of the population and a smaller increase in the old-age dependency ratio.

An alternative, or complement, to raising numbers outright would be to try to select future immigrants who are, on average, younger than those in the past.

1 In other words, the figure shows the age structure of the flow of immigrants landing in the year 2004 versus the age structure of the Canadian population in that year, including all immigrants landed before 2004.

Figure 2: *Age Distribution of Immigrants in 2004 Compared to Hypothetical Younger Scenario*



Source: Statistics Canada, authors' calculations.

Figure 2 compares the recent age distribution of immigrants to a hypothetical scenario in which Canada admitted almost exclusively parents aged 20–29 with young children. Current immigration practice offers no tool for doing that. For example, increasing the ratio of economic immigrants to family immigrants would not work, because although the family category includes disproportionate numbers of very young people (dependent children), it also includes many old people (parents and grandparents). New guidelines would need to target young parents with children, that is, filter specifically by age.[2] To maintain a modest degree of realism, our hypothetical scenario does not completely eliminate older immigrants — by banning family reunification and older refugees, for instance — but it does assume a major curtailment of their numbers. The younger-immigration scenario shown in Figure 2 is thus at the limit of the feasible, to say nothing of the ethical.

In this scenario, allocations to the three age groups below age 30 would rise sharply (though allowing for the obvious fact that immigrant children tend to come with their parents) while those to the three upper age groups would fall. Clearly, such a shift would magnify the effects of immigration on Canada's demographic structure.

2 Note that since the source populations from which we currently draw immigrants are also aging, simply keeping the age distribution of immigrants as in 2004 for future years would require some age filtering.

Four Immigration Scenarios

We now proceed to simulations of the effect of various immigration strategies on the future old-age dependency ratio (18–64/65+). We use a model maintained at the C.D. Howe Institute that enables us to make population projections on the basis of several assumptions about fertility, mortality and migration:

- Each province's total fertility rate remains at its 2003 level through the projection period.
- Life expectancy at birth by sex and province rises at rates akin to those in Statistics Canada's "medium" assumption for improvement in life expectancy.
- A constant share of the population of each age and sex emigrates every year.[3]

We model four immigration scenarios:

- Scenario 1 (baseline): Immigration by age and sex continues at its average level between 2000 and 2004.
- Scenario 2: Immigration rises to 1 percent of total population annually; its age structure is identical to the 2000–2004 average.
- Scenario 3: Immigration continues at its average level between 2000 and 2004 but with the younger age structure illustrated in Figure 2.
- Scenario 4: Immigration rises to 1 percent of total population but with the younger age structure illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 3 shows the actual evolution of the old-age dependency ratio since 1971, along with projections through the year 2050 in the four scenarios. The old-age dependency ratio has been rising since 1971, but it will start rising more steeply around 2012 as the bulk of baby boomers begin reaching age 65.

In the baseline scenario, with about 230,000 immigrants annually and an age structure similar to that of the recent past, old-age dependency rises rapidly until about 2030. The rate of increase then slows down, but the ratio keeps rising, reaching 46 percent in 2050.[4] Total population rises from 32.2 million today to 39.2 million in 2050.

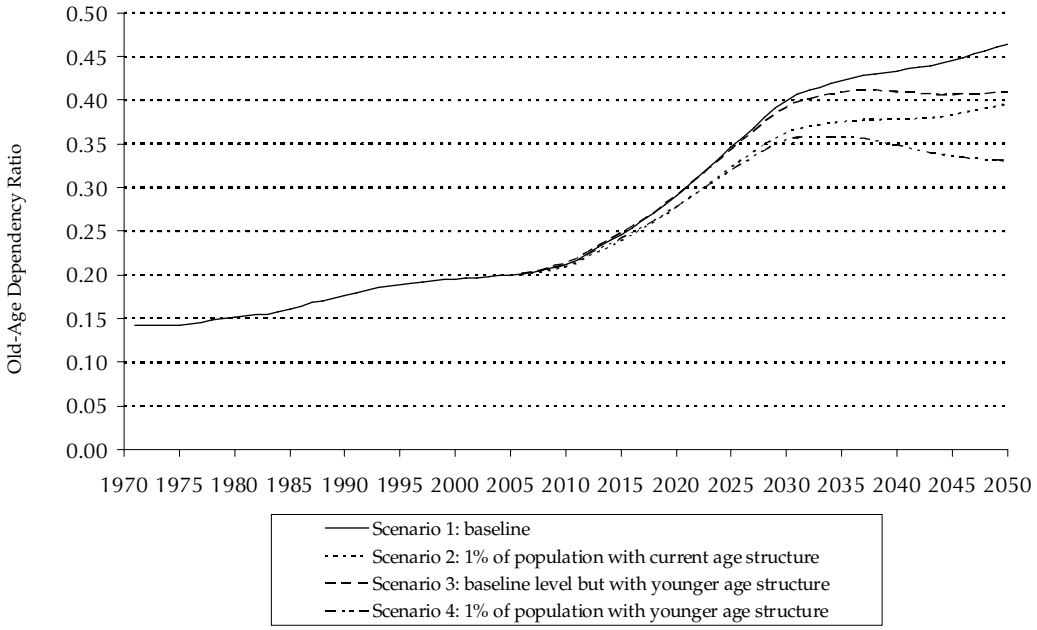
Scenario 2 illustrates the effect of increasing annual immigration to 1 percent of the population, again with an age structure like that of the recent past. This scenario slows the rate of population aging slightly, bringing the old-age dependency ratio to about 40 percent in 2050. With this increased immigration rate matching population growth, the number of Canadians would reach 48.9 million in 2050.

Scenario 3 investigates the impact of aggressively targeting younger immigrants (many of whom would be below 18 years of age) while keeping the

3 Younger immigrants to Canada appear likelier to emigrate again (Aydemir and Robinson 2006). Scenarios that feature a younger age profile of immigrants may therefore understate the level of gross immigration required to alleviate population aging.

4 This baseline projection is very close to United Nations projections, which place Canada's old-age dependency ratio at 45 percent in 2050 (United Nations 2002).

Figure 3: *Projected Old-Age Dependency Ratio Under Various Immigration Scenarios*



Source: Statistics Canada and authors' projections as described in the text.

level of immigration at 230,000 a year. In this scenario the old-age dependency ratio differs little from that in the baseline over the first 20 years, simply because very young immigrants take time to reach working age. But when they do, in about 2030, the old-age dependency ratio would stop rising within a few years and stabilize around 41 percent until 2050.

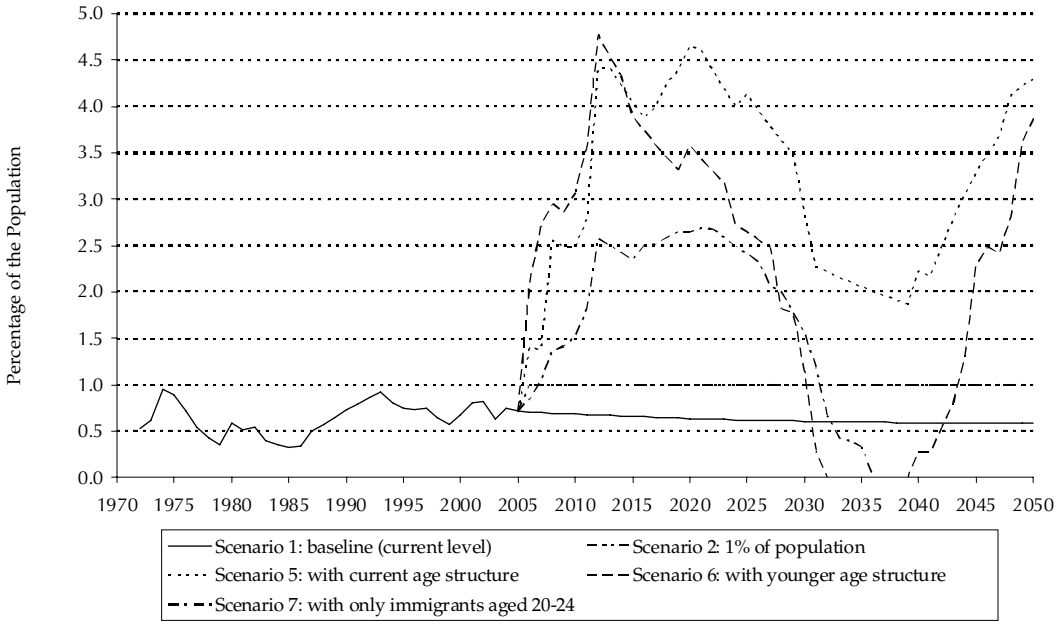
Finally, scenario 4 combines a severe age filter favouring younger immigrants with an increase in annual immigration to 1 percent of the population. This scenario would see the old-age dependency ratio going from 20 percent today to 36 percent in 2035. At that point, it would begin falling again, reaching 33 percent in 2050. So a very aggressive policy of selecting younger immigrants in much larger numbers could cap the old-age dependency ratio at 36 percent during the period 2030 to 2035. Before considering the moral and other problems of this scenario, however,[5] we note that the old-age dependency ratio would still rise much faster between 2006 and 2030 than at any time over the past 35 years.

Trying to Fix the Old-Age Dependency Ratio

These scenarios obviously do not exhaust the range of policies one can imagine in response to population aging. Suppose one came at the question from the other end, asking about the implications for immigration policy of picking a target for

5 A broader definition of the dependency ratio that covers both youth and seniors illustrates one problem. In the very aggressive scenario, the total dependency ratio (0–17 and 65+ relative to age 18-64) rises from 53 percent in 2005 to 72 percent in 2035. In scenario 2, this ratio stays below 70 percent through 2050.

Figure 4: *Immigration Required to Maintain Old-Age Dependency Ratio at 20 Percent*



Sources: Statistics Canada and authors' calculations as described in the text.

the old-age dependency ratio. What, for example, would stop the old-age dependency ratio from rising above the current figure of 20 percent?

Figure 4 looks at this question by plotting the level of immigration required to stabilize the old-age dependency ratio at 20 percent starting in 2006 in three further scenarios (it also reproduces scenarios 1 and 2 as points of comparison).[6]

The first of these further scenarios, scenario 5, looks at the level of immigration required to keep the old-age dependency ratio at 20 percent if immigrants have their current age distribution (the dark grey bars in Figure 2). The required increase is immediate and colossal: immigration would rise to 2.5 percent of the population by 2010, 4.4 percent of the population by 2012 and 4.7 percent by 2020 (at which point Canada's population would be 56.6 million and immigration 2.6 million). After 2020, the dynamics of reproduction and aging among the newly arrived immigrants reduce the required inflow to about 2 percent of the population in 2040; then it rises again, surpassing 4 percent of the population by 2050. In this scenario, Canada's population in 2050 would stand at 165.4 million and immigration would be above 7 million a year.

Scenario 6 tries the same exercise, using the younger age profile of immigrants (the light grey bars in Figure 2). The time profile of immigration required to cap the old-age dependency ratio resembles that in scenario 5, where immigrants had

6 Stopping the old-age dependency ratio from rising above 20 percent has the disadvantage of producing wild swings in the required level of immigration, but it has the advantage of being a transparent methodology reproducible by other researchers. These scenarios fix the dependency ratio at almost exactly 20 percent, except during a few years in some scenarios when required immigration goes to zero.

their recent age-profile, but the delay in younger immigrants reaching working age lifts the early peak and deepens the later valley. Immigration rises even faster until 2012, drops to zero by 2032 and then rockets upward again after 2039. The immigration and population figures are just as unrealistic in this case as in the previous scenario.

As the reader may foresee, even more extreme and unrealistic age filters would not let Canada stabilize its old-age dependency ratio at 20 percent through to 2050 without astronomical levels of immigration. Scenario 7 shows the levels required to hold the old-age dependency ratio at 20 percent if *all* new immigrants were equally distributed between the ages of 20 and 24, for an average age of 22. Because the old-age dependency ratio is calculated as population age 65 and up divided by population age 18–64, such an age filter ensures that every single immigrant lowers the old-age dependency ratio on arrival and for at least 40 years. Even so, immigration would have to climb to about 2.5 percent of the population within 10 years; between 2012 and 2030, Canada would admit an average of 1.2 million 20- to 24-year-olds annually, compared to about 20,000 in that age range now.

Judging the Scale of the Proposed Flows: Canada's Absorptive Capacity

Although we usually express immigration as a percentage of the resident population, that scale is misleading when immigration has the potential to change the population's age structure. If Canada tried to enlarge its supply of young people through immigration, resident young people would notice the impact, particularly through intensified competition in the job market. The volumes of immigration just discussed are huge, not just compared to past experience, but compared to the resident population in the relevant age range. For example, the population age 20–24 is now a little more than 2.2 million. So in the admittedly extreme case of scenario 7, where only immigrants in that age range are admitted, the annual inflow would be equal to more than 40 percent of the original stock (see Table 1). The impact of such a huge flow on wages in that age group, for example, would be horrendous.

Judging the Scale of the Proposed Flows: Source

Another perspective on the monumental scale of these imaginary flows is to consider where they would come from. There are many young people in the world, but most of them do not actually cross national borders in a given year, and a brief glance shows how large Canada's proposed draw on actual current flows would be.

There are no comprehensive data on worldwide international migrants by age. However, partial data for 17 major countries suggest that in recent years an average of some 350,000 people in the 20–24 age range have moved into those countries (Eurostat 2006; Migration Policy Institute 2006).[7] So, as a first

7 Depending on the country, data are for the years 2001 through 2005. When recent data are not available, we use average immigration over the 1990s.

Table 1: *Average Yearly Flow of Migrants Age 20–24 Required over the 2006–2026 Period to Stabilize the Dependency Ratio*

	000s	% of 2006 base population in Canada	% of migrants to major countries*
Baseline (scenario 1)	23.4	1.0	6.6
With current age structure (scenario 5)	192.8	8.6	54.5
With younger age structure (scenario 6)	233.0	10.4	65.8
With only immigrants between 20-24 (scenario 7)	971.8	43.5	274.6

Note: *Major countries are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Migration Policy Institute, EuroStat and authors' calculations.

approximation, Canada would be trying to divert all the people in this age range who would currently select one of those other countries as their destination, and would still need to seek almost twice as many again (see Table 1).

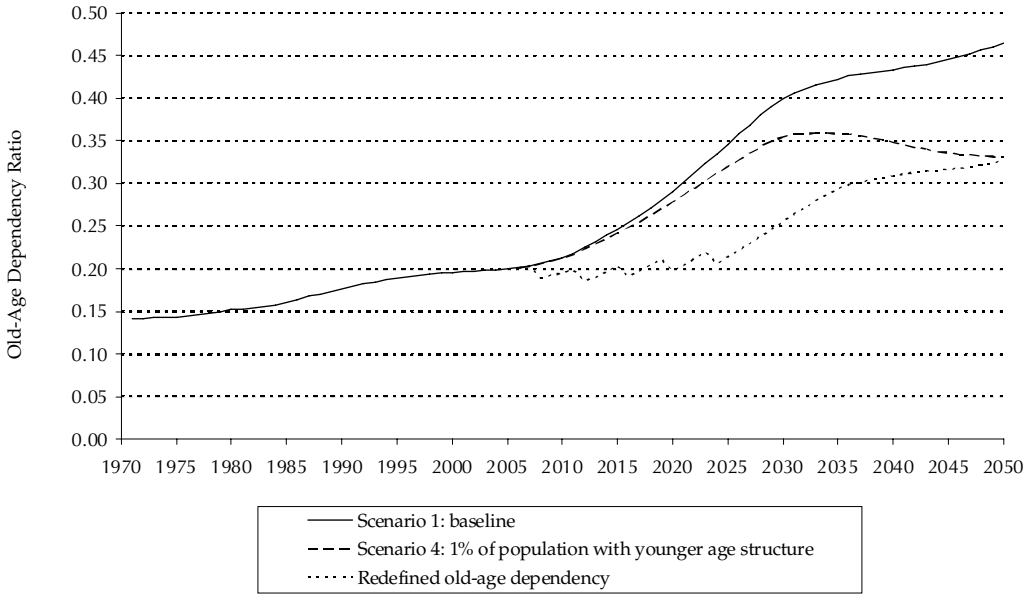
Even if such huge numbers of people were available, the sensitive question of the suitability of their education, skills and aptitudes for Canada's economy and society would become pressing. An effort to draw people in on such a scale would surely require Canada to become much less selective. Immigrants' labour-force participation rates currently trail those of the native-born by more than six percentage points for men and seven percentage points for women (OECD, 2005b). Even though the participation rates of older immigrants exceed those of their contemporaries born in Canada, trying to boost Canada's labour supply through vastly increased immigration of young people would, at least initially, be to fight a strong headwind.

Comparison with Longer Working Life

For a final perspective on immigration as an elixir of youth, we compare it to the frequent suggestion of responding to the challenge of population aging by pushing back the normal retirement age. Advances in longevity and shifts toward later workforce entry and less physically demanding occupations mean that today the lifetime equivalent of working until age 65 in 1970 is working until at least age 70. Yet for a variety of reasons, not least the incentives in many private and public pension plans, people are retiring earlier than they did in 1970.

A later average or standard retirement age would redefine the old-age dependency ratio. To put some numbers behind this simple point, we use the baseline projection assumptions and move the point at which the population is assumed to become inactive from 65 to 70 over the next 20 years. More precisely, starting in 2008, we raise that age by one year every four years until it reaches 70

Figure 5: *Projected Old-Age Dependency Ratio with Gradual Rise in Age of Dependency*



Source: Statistics Canada and authors' projections as described in the text.

in 2024. By comparing the time profile of this redefined ratio to the projections of earlier scenarios, we can assess the effectiveness of later retirement as opposed to bringing in more young immigrants.

The results illustrate how even a modest and gradual change in the normal work and retirement pattern would do more over the next four decades to reduce the old-age dependency ratio than even quite extreme changes to immigration policy (see Figure 5).

Conclusion

The message of these simulations is that we should not overstate the contribution immigration can make to keeping Canada young — and by extension, to alleviating the economic and fiscal consequences of demographic change. Increasing immigration to 320,000 a year without varying its age distribution would slow the rise in the old-age dependency ratio only marginally. And raising immigration to this level while trying to select only very young immigrants with children, so as to lower dramatically the average age of immigrants, would still not prevent a historic rise in the dependency ratio. Only extreme and unpalatable policies, such as rapidly increasing immigration from less than 1 percent of the population to well over 3 percent for decades, could come close to stabilizing the ratio.

There are many reasons besides concern about population aging that might lead Canadians to welcome more immigrants. The country's physical and cultural wealth was built largely by immigrants, and immigrants themselves are generally

much better off here than in their countries of origin. But immigration on its own can do little to alleviate the likely consequences of aging on Canada's age structure and government finances. Fortunately, we can expect automatic market adjustments to mitigate the effects of population aging on the economy; for example, a declining supply of labour should lead to upward pressure on wages, encouraging greater labour market participation, higher incomes and higher tax payments. No less important are policies to encourage work and saving — policies summarized in our illustration of the greater power of a later age of retirement to contain the rise in the old-age dependency ratio. Such policies would not only help Canada through a long and substantial demographic adjustment, but they would also provide a better economic and fiscal environment for the immigrants — in whatever numbers — who do arrive in the years to come.

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