

Cohort profiles

In recent years, several books have emerged which examine the role of demographics in shaping our lives. In particular, a 1996 book entitled *Boom, Bust & Echo* and written by a Canadian economist and demographer, David Foot, along with journalist Daniel Stoffman, has received a lot of attention.¹ These authors have studied patterns in Canadian fertility, birth, and immigration over the last century and, on this basis, have divided the current population into nine different demographic groups, or cohorts, each of which shares important and unique characteristics. The nine cohorts are listed in Table 1, along with the year they were born and their 1996 population.

Table 1

CANADIAN DEMOGRAPHIC COHORTS		
	Year of birth	Population in 1996
Pre-World War I	≤ 1914	627,000
World War I	1915–1919	589,000
The Roaring Twenties	1920–1929	2,000,000
The Depression babies	1930–1939	2,500,000
World War II	1940–1946	2,200,000
The baby boom	1947–1966	9,800,000
• early boomers	1947–1951*	
• mid-boomers	1952–1959*	
• late boomers or Generation X	1960–1966	
The baby bust	1967–1979	5,400,000
The baby-boom echo	1980–1995	6,900,000
The future	1996–2010	–

*D. Stoffman (personal communication, January 31, 1997)

Foot & Stoffman, 1996

The data from the 1995 Physical Activity Monitor allow for detailed comparisons of four major demographic groups based on Foot and Stoffman's cohorts:

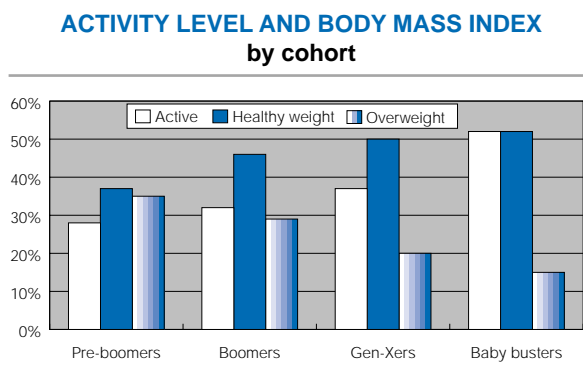
- **pre-boomers**, a heterogeneous group of people who were over 49 years old in 1995 and who belong to five distinct cohorts identified by Foot and Stoffman (the 1995 sample did not allow for more detailed comparisons of groups born prior to 1947);
- **boomers**, who were 36 to 48 years old in 1995 and comprise the early and mid-boomers, born in the period of peace and economic growth following World War II;
- **Gen-Xers**, who were 29 to 35 years old in 1995 and are the late boomers, born at the end of the single largest demographic cohort in Canada; together with the early and mid-boomers, they represent one-third of the Canadian population;
- **baby busters**, who were 16 to 28 years old in 1995; they were born during a period marked by a decline in births brought about by such factors as the introduction of the birth-control pill and the rising participation of women in the labour market.¹

Activity level and weight

The 1995 Physical Activity Monitor assessed the physical activity level of the various cohorts through a measure of average daily energy expenditure. A person with an average daily energy expenditure of at least 3 KKD (kilocalories/kilogram of body weight/day) is



Figure 1



1995 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

deemed active, and one who expends less than 0.5 KKD is considered sedentary.

As can be seen from Figure 1, activity level increases with each demographic group, with baby busters being the most active and pre-boomers being the least active. Indeed, baby busters are twice as active as pre-boomers.

At the same time, successively greater proportions of people in the older cohorts are at definite risk of health problems due to being overweight, as indicated by a body mass index (kg/m²) of 27 or higher. Correspondingly, a lower proportion of people in the older cohorts registered a body mass index in the healthy-weight range, between 20 and 25.

Behaviour has changed

Are today's 40-year-olds more or less active than the 40-year-olds of 15 years ago? One way to examine this question is to use the data from the 1981 Canada Fitness Survey to make projections about how active the different cohorts would be if they had the same physical activity levels as their predecessors. These projections can then be compared with the actual physical activity levels of the different cohorts in 1995.

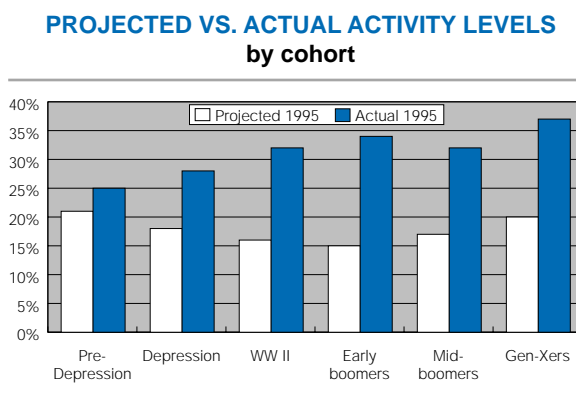
As shown by the actual and projected 1995 physical activity levels in Figure 2, the percentage of active Canadians in each cohort exceeds the percentage predicted solely on the basis of age. For example, among Canadians born during the Depression (aged 56–65 in

1995), the projected percentage of active individuals is 18%. This projection is based on the fact that 18% of Canadians aged 56–65 were active in 1981. By 1995, however, 28% of the Depression cohort were active, representing a 10-percentage-point gain over the predicted level. Depression kids are therefore more active than their predecessors were in 1981.

For Canadians born after the Depression, the gap between the projected and actual physical activity levels is even more dramatic. Age trends in 1981 indicated that physical activity levels would decrease among these cohorts. This has not been the case. Instead, physical activity levels have increased substantially. These increases may be due at least in part to the concerted efforts to change population physical activity levels in Canada over the past 20 years and signify a positive change in the way Canadians approach physical activity.

Seniors today are also more active than was projected. In particular, Canadians entering their retirement years—the Depression and World War II babies—are well on their way to be more active than current seniors. This is good news as it increases their chances of living disability-free longer than earlier cohorts. If boomers and pre-boomers maintain this pattern of exceeding their predecessors' activity levels over time, definite progress toward the goal of an active Canada will be made, and substantial health benefits will accrue.

Figure 2



1995 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

A glimpse of inner life

In addition to painting a picture of physical activity, the 1995 Physical Activity Monitor opens a window on the inner life of Canadians. Differences in life satisfaction and the degree of angst experienced by the various cohorts afford a glimpse of this inner life.

Life satisfaction was probed by asking respondents to rate how satisfied they were with each of five fundamental aspects of their lives—their home and family life, their work or school life, their social life, their leisure activities, and their physical activities.

Results indicated that in general, Canadians in all four demographic groups are not greatly dissatisfied with any of these fundamental aspects. They differed, however, in the extent to which they expressed *high* satisfaction with each of the five components (Table 2).

Table 2

LIFE SATISFACTION				
	Pre-boomers	Boomers	Gen-Xers	Baby busters
<i>Very satisfied with...</i>				
Work, school life	48%	42%	36%	30%
Home, family life	72	66	63	59
Social life	58	50	46	50
Leisure activities	50	35	28	31
Physical activities	44	28	23	27

1995 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

Work or school life Baby busters and Gen-Xers are less likely to be very satisfied with their work or school life than are boomers and pre-boomers.

Home and family life A telling pattern also emerges for home and family life, with relatively fewer baby busters and Gen-Xers indicating that they are very satisfied with their home life.

Social life Of all demographic groupings, pre-boomers appear to be the most satisfied with their social life. Gen-Xers seem the least satisfied.

Leisure activities Pre-boomers are far more inclined than others to be very satisfied with

their leisure activities. This essential element of life satisfaction shows the greatest difference in the degree of satisfaction reported by the four cohorts.

Physical activities With respect to physical activity, pre-boomers are once again clearly more inclined to say that they are very satisfied with this aspect of their lives.

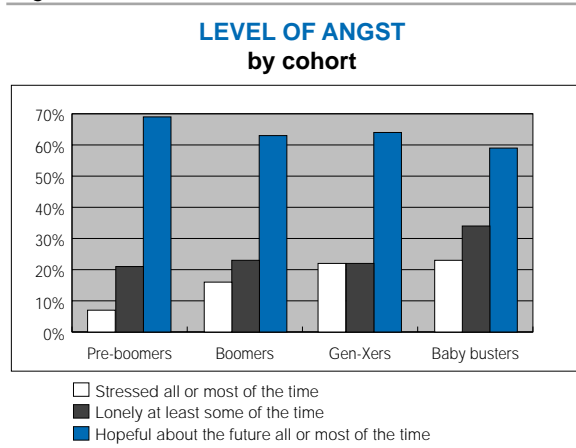
Nineties' angst

The relative angst experienced by individuals of different cohorts was examined by means of three major indicators: self-reported stress, experiences of loneliness, and hopefulness for the future.

Gen-Xers and baby busters are more likely than boomers and pre-boomers to report feeling stressed all or most of the time, and baby busters are more likely to report feeling lonely at least some of the time (Figure 3). In addition, about two-thirds of pre-boomers, boomers, and Gen-Xers report being hopeful about the future all or most of the time. Baby busters seem the least hopeful about the future.

Taken together, these results suggest that younger Canadians experience greater loneliness and stress and are less optimistic about their future than people in the boom and pre-boom groups. Moreover, given the lower life satisfaction among younger cohorts discussed earlier, these results suggest that Generation X and the baby-bust cohort are experiencing greater overall angst than their elders.

Figure 3



1995 Physical Activity Monitor, CFLRI

Toward a more active generation yet

Most demographic groups have increased their physical activity levels, and this despite an aging population. Canadians still have a long way to go before being considered active enough to benefit their health, however. Even in the most active cohort, the baby busters, only half are deemed active.

The relatively high level of angst experienced by the younger cohorts is of concern. Living in the rapidly changing world of the nineties presents particular social and economic challenges to these Canadians. In this context, it would be worthwhile to promote physical activity as a powerful tool for managing stress, depression, and emotional health more generally.²

Foot and Stoffman argue that demographics “play a pivotal role in the economic and social life of our country.” Understanding the nature of the different cohorts is therefore important in understanding change. Changing social norms, fostered by strategic interventions aimed at the population level, are also important and have probably contributed substantially to the trend toward higher levels of physical activity in Canada. The considerable work that has been done over the last 15 years to increase Canadians’ physical activity levels must therefore be continued.

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References

- ¹ Foot, D.K. & Stoffman, D. (1996). *Boom, bust & echo: How to profit from the coming demographic shift*. Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross.
- ² International Society of Sport Psychology. (1991). Physical activity and psychological benefits: An ISSP position statement. *ISSP Newsletter*, 2 (2), 1–3.

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Cohort profiles

1995 Physical Activity Monitor

	Pre-boomers	Boomers	Gen-Xers	Baby busters
ENERGY EXPENDITURE				
Active (≥ 3 KKD ¹)	28%	32%	37%	52%
Moderately active (1.5–2.9 KKD)	28	31	30	24
Somewhat active (0.5–1.4 KKD)	25	28	21	17
Sedentary (<0.5 KKD)	19	9	11	–
BODY MASS INDEX ²				
< 20	5	7	10	17
20–25	37	46	50	52
25–27	23	17	20	16
> 27	35	29	20	15
PERCEIVED HEALTH				
Very good	33	36	33	28
Good	32	41	43	48
Average	27	19	21	21
Poor or very poor	8	4	–	–
VERY SATISFIED WITH				
Home and family life	72	66	63	59
Work life	48	42	36	30
Social life	58	50	46	50
Leisure activities	50	35	28	31
Physical activities	44	28	23	27
STRESSED				
All or most of the time	7	16	22	23
Some of the time	29	48	41	44
Little or none of the time	64	36	37	33
LONELY				
All or most of the time	6	5	–	6
Some of the time	15	18	17	28
Little or none of the time	79	76	78	66
HOPEFUL ABOUT THE FUTURE				
All or most of the time	69	63	64	59
Some of the time	21	30	27	30
Little or none of the time	10	8	9	12

1 Kilo-calories/kilogram of body weight/day; an energy expenditure of 3 KKD is equivalent to walking one hour every day.

2 Body mass index = kg/m². Exact categories are as follows: ≤ 19.99 (underweight), 20.00 to 24.99 (recommended weight), 25.00 to 27.00 (possible overweight), >27.00 (overweight).

– Data unavailable because of insufficient sample size.

(cont'd)

	Pre-boomers		Boomers		Gen-Xers		Baby busters	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
ENERGY EXPENDITURE								
Active (≥ 3 KKD ¹)	25%	31%	28%	37%	38%	37%	50%	54%
Moderately active (1.5–2.9 KKD)	29	27	30	31	29	32	24	24
Somewhat active (0.5–1.4 KKD)	23	27	30	26	24	–	17	–
Sedentary (<0.5 KKD)	23	15	12	–	–	–	–	–
BODY MASS INDEX²								
< 20	6	–	10	–	14	–	25	–
20–25	44	29	55	37	56	44	55	49
25–27	12	35	15	19	12	28	13	19
>27	37	32	20	40	18	23	–	22
PERCEIVED HEALTH								
Very good	28	38	37	35	31	35	25	31
Good	32	32	37	45	42	43	48	48
Average	33	20	22	16	25	16	24	18
Poor or very poor	7	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
VERY SATISFIED WITH								
Home and family life	70	75	67	64	64	61	67	51
Work life	43	51	41	42	33	39	30	29
Social life	58	59	54	46	47	44	53	48
Leisure activities	52	48	35	34	29	27	31	32
Physical activities	42	45	28	27	18	28	25	29
STRESSED								
All or most of the time	8	–	17	14	27	15	28	19
Some of the time	31	27	46	50	36	47	42	46
Little or none of the time	61	67	37	36	37	38	30	36
LONELY								
All or most of the time	8	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Some of the time	18	12	18	19	23	–	24	30
Little or none of the time	74	83	76	77	71	85	69	64
HOPEFUL ABOUT THE FUTURE								
All or most of the time	68	69	67	57	61	68	57	60
Some of the time	22	20	25	35	33	20	29	30
Little or none of the time	10	–	7	–	–	–	14	10

1 Kilojoules/kilogram of body weight/day; an energy expenditure of 3 KKD is equivalent to walking one hour every day.

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