

## Population shifts changing Canadian cities

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Studying the map of Canada's population growth over the last census period shows winners and losers amongst Canadian towns and cities.

As our first column last month showed, Western Canadian cities are leading the population and economic boom; the flip side of that coin is that a number of cities and smaller communities in the central and eastern parts of Canada are seeing their population decline or remain stagnant. That is changing how municipalities function. There is no guarantee of their future.

Rural communities are particularly vulnerable as the farming population is now the oldest in our history. Bright farm kids are leaving to get their education—and not coming back. Farming is hard work and not always financially lucrative. As small towns are discovering, it is horribly easy to get caught in a downward spiral. As the town's population ages and gets smaller, local businesses close as shoppers seek bargains in suburban big box stores. Provincial and federal governments, looking for their own cost-cutting measures, close traditional schools, hospitals, post offices. Community centres and local churches see their attendance crumbling, and the traditional social structure and support groups are diminished. It is a terribly difficult path to reverse.

For cities, the latest census analysis shows clearly that the vast majority of the growth—well over 90% in most cases—in most of our metropolitan areas is occurring in the suburbs. Montreal, Edmonton, Calgary and Ottawa are seeing almost all of their growth outside their core areas.

In the GTA, for the first time in history, the population of the suburban area—known as the “905” (the telephone prefix) district is now larger than the city of Toronto.

These demographic changes then result in a ripple impact. One key indicator—the closing of inner-city or older schools as the population ages, the number of kids in that neighborhood declines, and school boards and provincial Ministries of Education are forced to shut down schools. This is a problem for the municipality as often the school has been the heart of a particular neighbourhood, the land around the school has been a traditional playground for kids and families, and suddenly it is all fenced and up for sale.

In Nova Scotia, for example, the peak school attendance was 215,000 in 1971. In 2020, the prediction is that the school population will be about half of that. The disruption to family life, long bus rides, extracurricular activities and so on goes through the entire neighbourhood. And of course, what to do with closed school buildings?

A number of smart cities have encouraged growth in their downtown through innovative investments in culture, local food, hi-tech, arts, restoring heritage properties, making the construction of new residential buildings very easy and appealing, cleaning up their core, designing new public gathering spaces and places and so on.

The intent is to attract both empty-nesters and the young creative class. Their energy and interest in a vibrant social scene, unique housing options, not having to drive and the ease of apartment or condo living is appealing to many. This also means the municipality doesn't have to invest in costly suburban infrastructure development and can support in-fill projects.

Infrastructure is driving many municipal decisions, and financing infrastructure is a huge problem for Canada's towns and cities. That's the subject of our next column, as we get ready for the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Infrastructure Summit in Regina in September.

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