Population Trends in the U.S. and Canada

In TV crime shows the credo ‘follow the money’ guides investigations. In the world of demographics the guiding principle is ‘follow the baby boom.’ For decades in the past and for decades into the future, the driver behind major trends in the United States and Canada is the unprecedented level of births following World War II. Currently, baby boomers represent one-third of the total populations in the U.S. and Canada. An indication of the importance put on the impact of the boomer was the selection by *Time* magazine of the Baby Boom Generation as its 1967 ‘Man of the Year.’

To appreciate the magnitude of this impact, one need only follow trends in TV advertising:

- In the 1950s and early 1960s, when families with baby boom children were getting established, TV commercials focused on automobiles, household appliances, and children’s products.

- In the late 1960s and 1970s, when the baby boom children were achieving adulthood and becoming a huge block of consumers, commercials were all about the youth culture — the music, the dress, and free thinking of the Flower Power Generation.

- In the 1980s and early 1990s, as the baby boomers started to reach middle age, the focus of commercials shifted to ‘preserving youth’ — fitness, healthful eating, and living the rugged outdoor life.

- In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the first baby boomers start reaching the half-century mark, the commercials are starting to zero in on the challenges of aging — commercials for restoring sexual vigor, planning for retirement, and guarding against the challenges of aging.

The Impact on Early Childhood Education

The early childhood field has been impacted as much if not more than any other sector of society by the baby boom. In the late 1960s and 1970s, when baby boomers started having children, the population of children under five reached an all-time high in the U.S. This peaked in the early 1960s when this cohort surpassed 20 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This huge cohort of young children, combined with the dramatic increase in the number of mothers with preschool children entering the workforce and the shrinking family size (leaving families with more resources to devote per child), resulted in the exploding demand for early childhood services. As a result, the number of preschool children enrolled in child care programs more than tripled from 1970 to 1989 (Neugebauer, 1994).

The baby boom was followed by a ‘baby bust’ from 1965 to 1976, and that was followed by a ‘baby boom echo’ as baby boom grandchildren started to have children. The result is the up and down in the cycle population of children under five that can be seen in Chart A.
Looking at this chart, you can also see that shortly after the turn of the century, the population of children under five returned to the peak years of the 1960s.

Furthermore, projections call for the under five population to steadily increase through 2050 in the U.S., surpassing 25 million within 25 years. These continuing increases will not be driven so much by the baby boom effect. Rather, all projected increases will be due to the arrival of new immigrants and the children born to them in the U.S. (Cohn, 2008).

The New Population Boom — the Elderly

While the Baby Boom Generation is no longer significantly impacting the child population numbers, it is impacting the early childhood world in a new way. As this huge cohort in the population starts reaching age 65 in 2009, the elderly end of the population spectrum in the U.S. and Canada will begin to explode. A review of Charts B and C reveals that in both the U.S. and Canada, the 65 and over cohorts represent an increasingly large proportion of the population. As early as 2020, the elder cohort will be three times bigger than the preschool cohort in both the U.S. and Canada.

In the coming years, the number of preschool children should continue to rise in the U.S. and remain fairly stable in Canada. However, from a public policy point of view, the attention that will be paid to the early years may begin to recede as the needs of the elderly population loom larger and larger.

References
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