



Canada's Invisible and Invaluable Labour Force*

Labour Day typically comes with a barrage of reports on the status of work in Canada. How many Canadians are employed and how many are looking for work. What they are paid and how these earnings compare to last year. Whether the numbers are better or worse than our American counterparts.

Of course, this is crucial information and we need it to understand both current and future prospects for Canadian workers. But there is another group of essential workers about whom little will have been written.

These are the 8.1 million informal caregivers who provide some form of care to elderly parents or individuals with severe and prolonged disabilities. Statistics Canada reported that in 2012, 28 percent of Canadians aged 15 and older cared for a family member or friend with a long-term health condition, disability or aging needs.

Age-related needs topped the list, with 28 percent of caregivers providing assistance to elderly parents. Cancer was

next at 11 percent, followed by cardiovascular disease at 9 percent and mental illness at 7 percent.

While informal caregivers deliver essential services, they perform these tasks at no pay. They basically make up a vast but largely unrecognized and hidden work force in the country.

In fact, unpaid caregivers provide more than 80 percent of care required by individuals with long-term conditions. These informal workers contribute an estimated \$5 billion of unpaid labour a year to the health care system. One report pegged this figure at closer to an annual \$25 billion if all the wide-ranging tasks performed by caregivers are included in the calculation.

Whether their economic value is \$5 billion or \$25 billion is largely irrelevant in the grand scheme. Caregiver contributions, both individually and collectively, are incalculable and invaluable because they add profoundly to the quality of life of the individuals for whom care is provided.

* This commentary was published as an op ed entitled "They're informal, but these workers are essential" in the *Globe and Mail* on September 1, 2014.

But the fact that caregivers are unpaid has meant that both their contributions and their concerns have gone ignored. Their “invisibility” also results from women still providing the bulk of unpaid care. They are simply expected to pick up these responsibilities as part of the caregiving role women typically assume in society.

In a recent keynote address, a financial planning guru was asked by a retiring audience member about the best steps to take in order to secure one’s future. His answer: “Get yourself a daughter.”

The reply was only partly in jest. Caregiving used to be the exclusive domain of women. But this societal expectation is changing, fortunately. Data from Statistics Canada’s 2012 General Social Survey showed that women now account for a slight majority of caregivers, at 54 percent.

The survey also found that caregiving responsibilities typically fall to those ages 45 to 64, with 44 percent of caregivers in this category. Most informal caregivers of this age also likely participate in the paid labour market – unless they have to withdraw because of their caregiving demands.

The demographics mean that employers must come to terms with caregiving realities, which only will grow with Canada’s aging population. Businesses will have to allow more time and work flexibility. This need is particularly true for the care of persons with episodic conditions, who have remissions with periods of good functioning and recurrences that may require intensive assistance – all unpredictable.

For their part, governments can provide more assistance with expensive health-related costs. They can also modify income security policies to allow some time off for caregiving. Employment Insurance has taken baby steps in this regard but needs a more generous approach.

Neither should workers, who must take some time for caregiving, be penalized in their pension vesting. Several countries, including Australia and Britain, have special pensions intended specifically for caregivers. Others make pension contributions on behalf of caregivers to avoid later penalty for lost employment time during working years. No individual should be driven into poverty, either in present or future, because of caregiving responsibilities.

On Labour Day, we need to pay attention to this huge group of essential workers: the millions of informal caregivers who show up nowhere in the employment numbers, but figure so prominently in real life.

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