

After the boomers, it's Generation Squeeze

Ingrid Peritz

Globe and Mail

Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2011

After Generation X and Generation Y, here comes a new name for young Canadians: Generation Squeeze.

A British Columbia study finds that young families in the country are facing growing financial and time pressures even as their baby-boomer elders head into easier-than-ever retirement.

It all has the makings of a "silent generational crisis," according to researchers.

"The baby boomers as parents lucked out, and their children for the first time will not enjoy the same standard of living as their parents," said Paul Kershaw, a political scientist at the University of British Columbia. "It's become hard to raise a young family and easier to retire."

Prof. Kershaw, an associate professor at the Human Early Learning Partnership, released a study on Tuesday with colleague Lynell Anderson showing that new families today have a lower standard of living than the baby-boomer generation, even though the Canadian economy has doubled in size since 1976.

And while the share of young women contributing to household incomes is up 53 per cent, average household incomes for young couples overall have remained static since the mid-1970s, after adjusting for inflation. Yet housing prices during the same period rose 76 per cent nationwide.

That's left Canadian parents raising young kids today squeezed for time, money and child-care services, Prof. Kershaw said.

"What we have now is Generation Squeeze," he said.

It's a far rosier picture for boomers, according to the study. Compared to their counterparts in the 1970s, they're heading into retirement well off because the housing market has nearly doubled over their adult lives, the study shows.

"They're approaching retirement with higher incomes and more wealth than any previous generation of retirees," Prof. Kershaw said.

The findings come as no surprise to young Canadians who have grown up in the shadow of the demographic juggernaut of the baby-boom generation.

Louis-François Brodeur, a 32-year-old PhD management student in Montreal, says the study resonates with a generation tackling growing debt and shrinking services.

“Between student debts, precarious jobs, the public debt and tough access to homes, it’s normal to feel cornered,” said Mr. Brodeur, head of a Quebec group called Force Jeunesse, which studies policy issues around young workers in the province. “I don’t want to call it a war between the generations, but young people know we’re going to have to find solutions. [Baby boomers] are very numerous and there are fewer of us.”

Rémi Bourget, a 29-year-old Montreal lawyer with a six-month-old baby at home, says his generation faces the “worst of both worlds” with high taxes coupled with growing user fees for health care and other services.

“I’m paying the debt for the previous generation – plus I’m paying for their retirement and health-care costs,” he said. “These are our parents and grandparents, but we feel like we’re cleaning up after their mess, while normally it’s parents who clean up after their children’s mess.”

The gap between haves and have-nots is playing itself out at Occupy Wall Street protests across North America, and it can only be addressed by tackling tensions between the generations, Prof. Kershaw said. But young Canadians can’t just blame boomers for their woes; they need to follow their elders by becoming more politically engaged, he said. That means turning out to vote.

“They need to care less about who’s being voted off some island on TV,” he said, “and more about who’s being voted into our legislatures.”