In Focus

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The Looming Bequest Boom — What Should We Expect?

by Benjamin Tal

Over the next decade an estimated $750 billion will be transferred to Canadians between the age of 50 and 75. That will be the largest intergenerational wealth transfer in Canadian history over such a period of time. And the amount will be even larger during the subsequent decade. This significant wealth transfer could impact important economic variables such as wealth distribution, savings, labour market participation, start-up activity, and real estate markets.

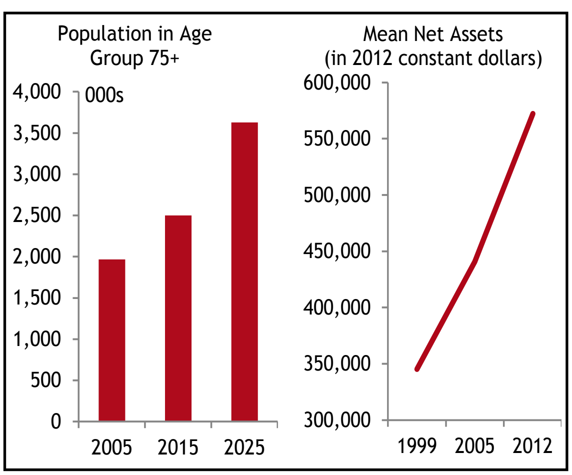
The Givers

There are currently just over 2.5 million Canadians over the age of 75, of which close to 45% are widowed. That number (75 years and older) represents a 25% jump over the level seen a decade ago. And the next decade will see an even greater jump (Chart 1, left). Yes, Canadians are living longer with mortality rates among the elderly falling steadily, but the demographic picture still suggests that, in absolute terms, more Canadians over the age of 75 will pass away in the coming decade (Chart 2). And the new cohort of that age group is not only the largest on record, but also the wealthiest. Average net worth among Canadians at this age has risen 30% between 2005 and 2012 (Chart 1, right). We estimate that total net worth of this cohort is currently north of $900 billion.

The Beneficiaries

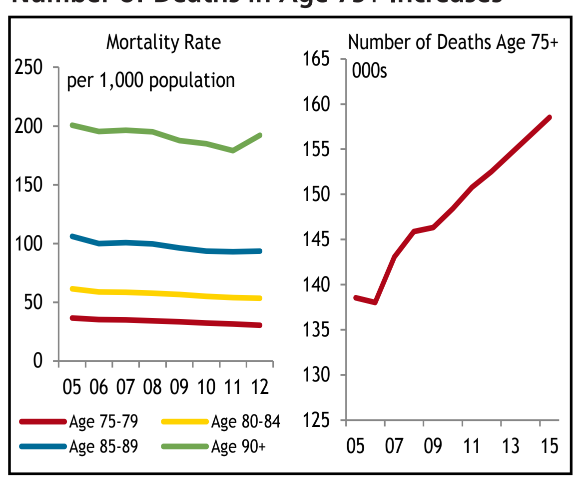
On the receiving end of that inheritance pool are mostly Canadians aged 50-75. Their number has risen dramatically over the past decade as more baby boomers passed the age of 50. That cohort will continue to grow in the coming decade, but more slowly. While debt accumulation among those baby boomers has accelerated in recent years, their overall financial position has, in fact,

Chart 1
The Givers



Source: Statistics Canada, CIBC

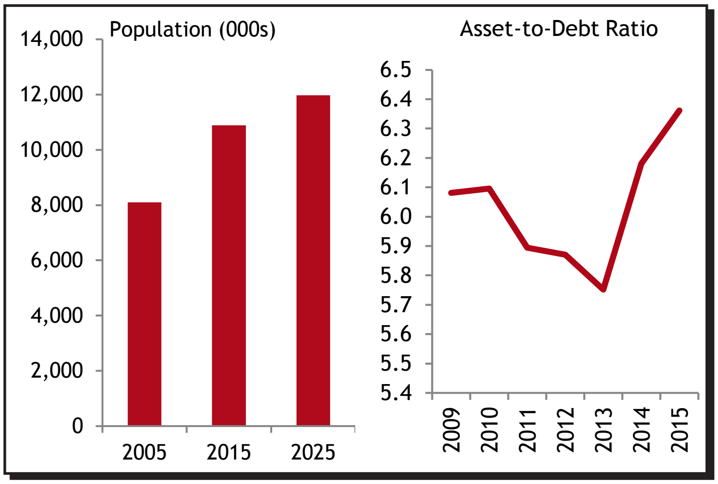
Chart 2
Despite Decrease in Mortality Rate, Number of Deaths in Age 75+ Increases



Source: Statistics Canada, CIBC

Chart 3

Age Group 50-75



Source: Statistics Canada, The Financial Monitor, CIBC

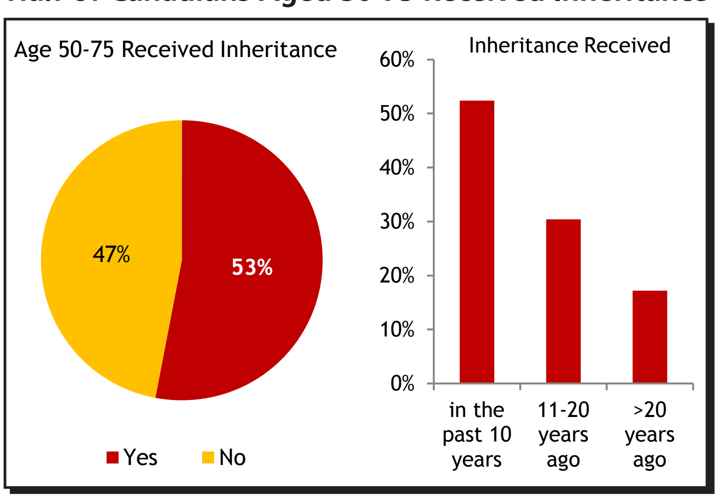
improved with the ratio of assets to debt recovering strongly in recent years (Chart 3).

So, How Much?

Guesstimating the amount of that wave of potential inheritance is tricky. Most estimates are based on forward looking questions, asking potential beneficiaries what they expect to receive. It's clear that that approach is problematic for many obvious reasons. We have decided to tackle the issue differently, and asked Canadians about the inheritance they actually received as opposed to what they expect to receive[1]. And then we derived our estimates by adjusting to (predictable) demographic changes. The rationale here is that talking about the past is easier, and the answers should be more accurate.

Chart 4

Half of Canadians Aged 50-75 Received Inheritance

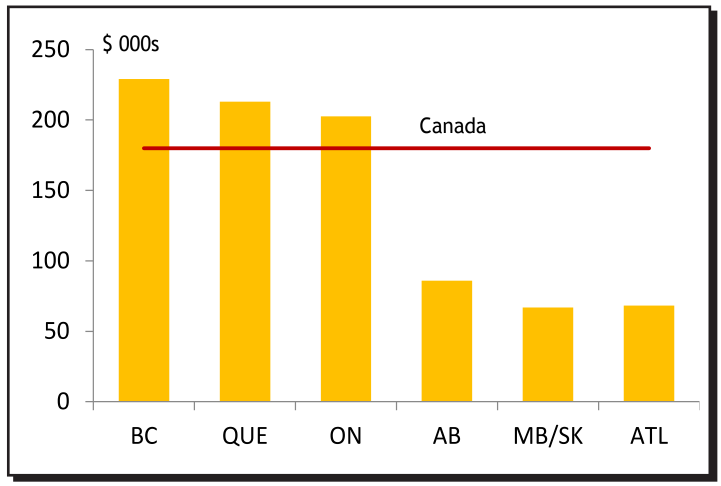


Source: CIBC Inheritance Survey, 2016

So what have we learned? Just over half of Canadians aged 50-75 have received an inheritance. And half of those received it in the past decade (Chart 4). Zooming in on that sub-group, the average inheritance was $180,000 with the largest amount being in British Columbia, no doubt due to the elevated value of real estate in the province, followed by Québec and Ontario. For the rest of the country, the average inheritance received over the past decade was below $100,000 (Chart 5).

Chart 5

Average Inheritance Received in the Past Decade



Source: CIBC Inheritance Survey, 2016 (age group 50-75, past 10 yrs)

Based on that information, and Statistic Canada's demographic projections, alongside conservative assumptions regarding wealth appreciation[2], we estimate that the coming decade will see close to $750 billion exchanging hands (Chart 6). That is almost 50% more than the estimated amount of inheritance received over the past decade. The transfer is estimated to boost the asset position of Canadians 50-75 years old by no less than 20%.

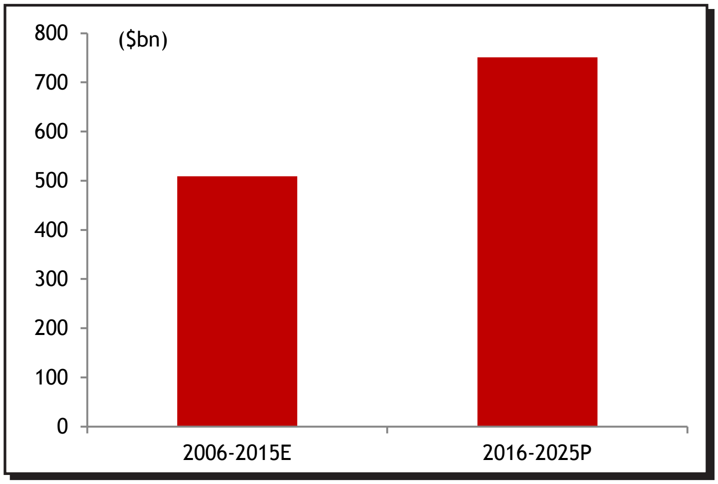
Naturally, the economic impact of a bequest is largely a function of how it is used. A typical household has several options here. It may increase current and future spending and therefore decrease its current active saving. Households also may elect to consume some of the new wealth in the form of leisure and decrease their labour market engagement. As well, the beneficiaries may use some of the money to make *inter-vivos* gifts to family.

[1] From April 26 to April 27, 2016, an online survey was conducted among 1,003 Angus Reid Forum panelists who are Canadians between 50-75 years old and have received an inheritance. The margin of error - which measures sampling variability - is +/- 3.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20. The results have been statistically weighted according to gender and region. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding.

[2] We assumed annual return on assets (real estate & financials) of 3%.

Chart 6

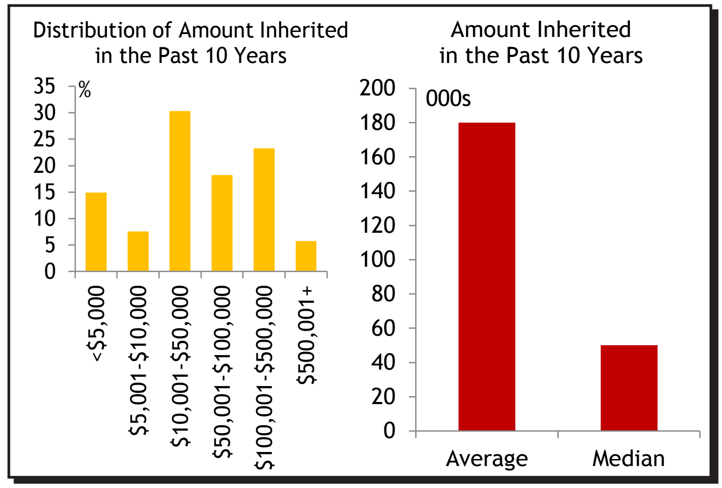
Total Inheritance



Source: Statistics Canada, CIBC, CIBC Inheritance Survey, 2016 (age group 50-75, past 10 yrs, inflation adjusted)

Chart 8

Uneven Distribution



Source: CIBC Inheritance Survey, 2016 (age group 50-75, past 10 yrs)

Inheritance and Inequality

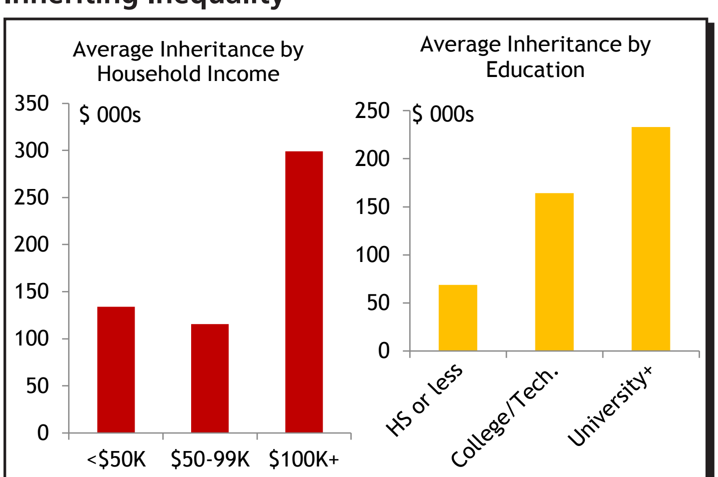
The abnormal distribution of average inheritance by province is the first hint that the average figure hides a lot of interesting information. Focusing on the distribution by income clearly shows that more money is going to Canadians that are already in higher income brackets, with average inheritance for those who earn more than $100,000 almost three times higher than among lower-income Canadians. The same goes for the breakdown by education; those with higher education received notably more in inheritance (Chart 7). This largely abnormal distribution is reflected clearly in Chart 8, with the average inheritance more than four times larger than the median.

The large proportion of the looming bequest boom that is expected to go to high-income Canadians suggests that income inequality will be further transformed into wealth inequality. Roughly 40% of high-income individuals indicated that they saved or invested their inheritance, while a larger proportion of lower income Canadians used that money towards daily expenses (Chart 9). Simply put, if wealth is not evenly spread across society, then inheritance will repeat the pattern and exacerbate inequality.

Given that many households will receive inheritances when they are approaching retirement age, the upcoming transfer can potentially impact the Canadian retirement landscape. As demonstrated earlier, higher-

Chart 7

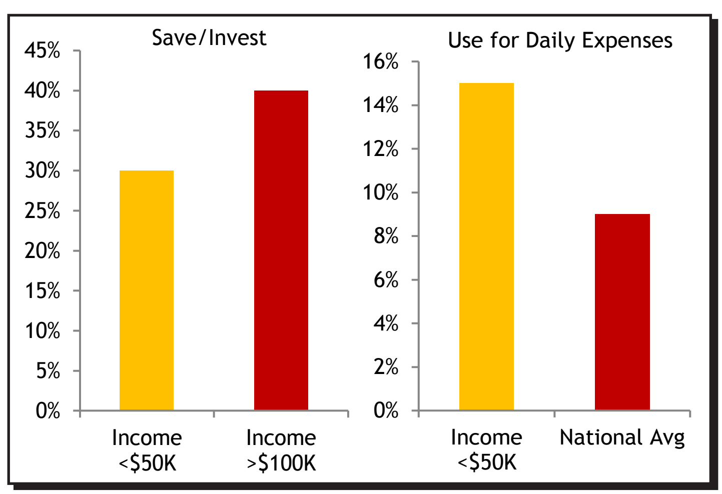
Inheriting Inequality



Source: CIBC Inheritance Survey, 2016 (age group 50-75, past 10 yrs)

Chart 9

What Did You Do With Your Inheritance?



Source: CIBC Inheritance Survey, 2016 (age group 50-75, based on total sample) income households, who are less likely to be unprepared for retirement, are more likely to receive inheritances and to receive larger amounts than their lower-income counterparts. Therefore, inheritance will have little impact on their decision to retire and will potentially improve their already sufficient level of retirement readiness. At the same time, the anticipated inheritance receipts of low- and middle-income households represent a much larger percentage of their current wealth, suggesting that inheritances could potentially be more influential in boosting their retirement security. Based on research done in the US, the average inheritance increases the probability of retirement by only 3%, and the impact on retirement security is statistically significant, but relatively modest[3]. We have no reason to believe that the situation in Canada is very different.

Another potential impact of large-scale inheritance is to stimulate labour supply by encouraging self-employment as it reduces the liquidity constraints on starting a business. Our assessment is that the net outcome of the upcoming inheritance wave will be an increase in self-employment activity among Canadians over the age of 50.

Furthermore, one-fifth of beneficiaries indicated that the money was used to reduce debt. Given the expected notable increase in the inheritance pool in the coming decade, that can impact the pace of debt accumulation, and more so, the distribution of debt. The impact on real estate markets will be gradual, and in large cities such as Toronto and Vancouver it might modestly ease the shortage of supply of low-rise units. Furthermore, given elevated real estate valuations, it's reasonable to expect that a larger portion of the projected inheritance will be transferred via *inter-vivos* gifts—a factor that might have a positive impact on homeownership rates among younger Canadians, and would probably increase overall spending on home renovations.

[3] *Center for Retirement Research at Boston College. How do Inheritances Affect the National Retirement Risk Index?, September 2015*