

Beanpole families sprout social change

John Carvel, Social Affairs Editor

The Guardian, January 29, 2003

"Beanpole families" - those with fewer children and multiple generations of older people - are leading to profound social changes, government statisticians warned yesterday.

The beanpole effect was the outcome of a nationwide "pruning of the family tree", the office for national statistics said. Fewer brothers and sisters in one generation leads to fewer aunts and uncles in the next. So, instead of a "bushy" family tree with lots of lateral branches, there are longer, thinner patterns of family relationships.

More great-grandparents are surviving into their eighties and nineties, and there are fewer young siblings.

"We are in the midst of one of the most striking demographic shifts for generations, as the ageing of the population becomes a reality," said Penny Babb, editor of the 2003 Social Trends, published yesterday. "The number of people aged 65 and over in the UK has increased by more than half over the past 40 years ... it is projected to exceed the number of young people under 16 in just 11 years' time."

The average life expectancy for men is 81 and for women 84. This has increased the proportion of people with grandparents and great-grandparents, with important implications for the role of grandparents in the family.

"The increased participation of mothers in the labour market and the rise in relationship breakdowns has meant that more grandparents may be called on to help care for their grandchildren," Ms Babb said.

In Britain 61% of grandparents see their grandchildren at least once a week and 78% at least once a month. Almost as many have contact by letter, phone, fax or email.

The ageing of the population is graphically illustrated by a surprising statistic showing 43% of adults over 24 have grandparents, said the statisticians. Almost 90% of people over 60 are grandparents.

In 2001 children made up 20% of the population, compared with 23% in 1961. By 2011 the percentage will fall to 18%, say the statisticians. There were 9.4m people aged 65 or over in 2001, an increase of 51% since 1961. And there were 1.1m aged 85 and over, more than three times as many as in 1961. "Projections suggest the numbers aged 65 and over will exceed the numbers aged under 16 by 2014. By 2025 there will be more than 1.6m more people over the age of 65 than people under 16," the statisticians say.

But grandparents may find they cannot rely on their families. Surveys indicate 63% of the British public think it is the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the old.