

LIFE EXPECTANCY AND SOCIAL POLICY

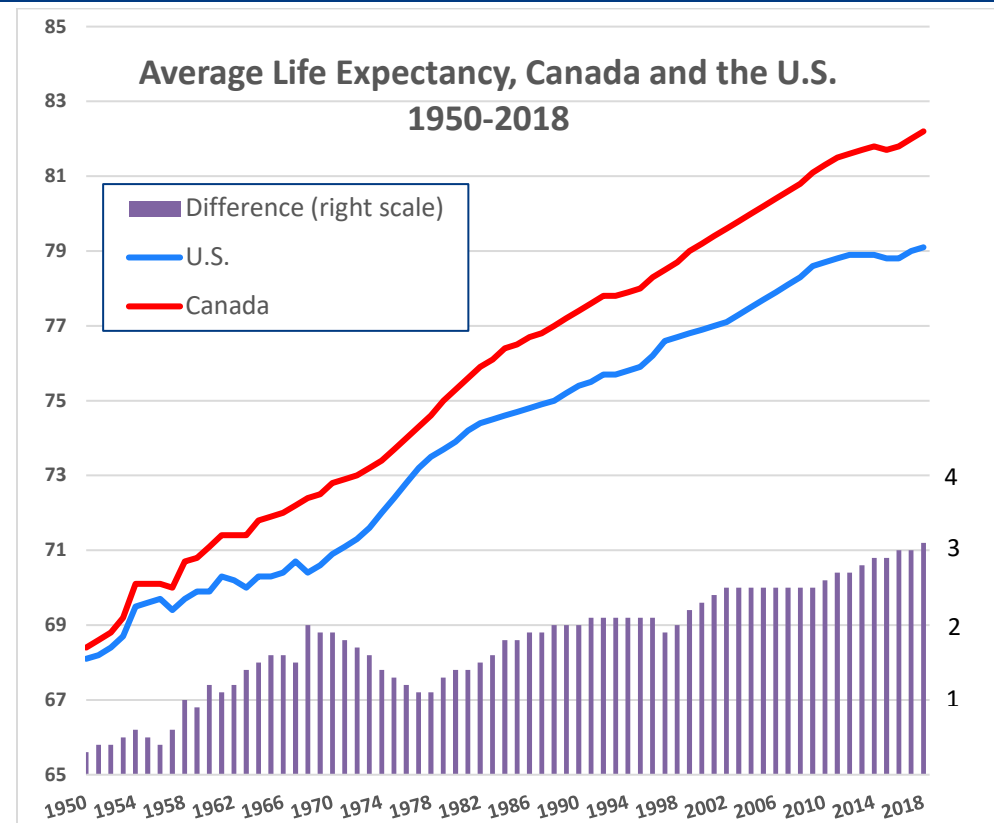
Canada and the United States are similar in many ways. With respect to life expectancy, however, they differ, and that difference is growing over time.

The two lines in the figure show data on life expectancy, measured in years, in Canada and the United States for the time period 1950-2018. The height of the bars identifies the difference in life expectancy (Canada minus the U.S.) in each year.

In 1950, a new-born had a life expectancy of about 68 years in both countries. Since that time life expectancy has grown in both countries but noticeably more quickly in Canada. In 2018 life expectancy was 82.2 years in Canada, but only 79.1 years in the U.S. The difference in life expectancy between the two countries has trended upward more or less steadily, except for a period in the 1970s when life expectancy grew faster in the U.S. than in Canada. The difference in life expectancies has increased by nearly a full year since 2000.

There are many reasons why average life expectancy might be different in one country relative to another. Differences in social policies may be one explanation.

Researchers have identified several possible explanations for growing gaps in life expectancies across countries. An intriguing possibility that has garnered considerable attention is a difference in government spending on social programs. Researchers at the [School of Public Policy](#) have confirmed for Canada what researcher [Elizabeth Bradley and co-authors](#) have shown using international data, namely, that higher life expectancy is associated with a higher ratio of social spending to direct health spending. Recent [research](#) investigating what specific areas of social spending have the greatest impact, suggests that significant gains in life expectancy could be



Source: Data on life expectancy from [Gapminder](#). Population data from [United Nations](#).

realized in the U.S. should expenditures on education and what the study broadly-defines as disability benefits be increased to the maximum levels observed in other OECD countries. Interestingly, while Canada ranks highly among OECD countries when it comes to spending on education, it is, along with the U.S., a relative laggard when it comes to spending on disability benefits as defined in the study. These and [other research results](#) suggest that a redirection of health spending toward specific programs of social support, perhaps particularly disability supports, might, in Canada as well as in the U.S., be effective at increasing average life expectancy.