THE COMPONENT STRUCTURE OF ELDERLY POPULATION GROWTH IN THE NETHERLANDS: 1950–1980 *

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Abstract. While there is no doubt about the magnitude of the growth of older age groups in industrialized nations, its structural components are less well understood. This paper examines the roles played by cohort succession and mortality in the process for the Netherlands during the period 1950 to 1980. While the size of population aged 65 and over has increased for both males and females, increases in the size of succeeding cohorts explain all of the growth in the older male population. Reductions in mortality at the older old ages play a much greater role than do reductions at younger old ages; the latter reductions occur among females only.


Alors qu'il n'y a aucun doute sur l'importance de la croissance de la population des personnes âgées dans les pays industriels, ses composantes structurelles sont moins bien connues. Cet article envisage les rôles joués par les cohortes successives et la mortalité dans le processus de vieillissement en Hollande, durant la période s'étendant de 1950 à 1980. Tandis que la taille de la population des 65 ans et plus a augmenté à la fois chez les hommes et chez les femmes, l'accroissement de la taille des cohortes successives explique entièrement la croissance de la population masculine. Des réductions dans la mortalité aux âges les plus élevés jouent un rôle plus important que des réductions aux âges moins élevés; ces dernières réductions ne jouent que sur les populations féminines.

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1. Introduction

In a paper on the economic and social implications of aging in the Netherlands, Van der Wijst and Van Poppel (1985) have described the growth of the older Dutch population. As in many Western countries, the older population of the Netherlands has increased dramatically since 1950. At mid-century there were about 772 thousand persons aged 65 and over. In the 30-year period between then and 1980, the older population increased by 110 percent to 1.6 million, while the total population of the country increased by only 40 percent. Thus the percentage of the total population aged 65 and over increased from 7.7 in 1950 to 11.5 in 1980.

While descriptions of the growth of the older population as a proportion of total population are useful and important for developing a better understanding of the social and economic consequences of aging, it is also important that we develop a better understanding of the demographic mechanisms through which that growth is occurring. Information on the sources of change and how they operate to produce growth helps to improve projections of the size of the older population, and thus better helps society to make provision for both the absolute and relative numbers of older persons in the future. Further, older populations growing from different sources of change have different compositions, and therefore different needs, and different consequences for society.

Accordingly, the general objective of this paper is to examine the growth of the older population in the Netherlands, analytically separating out the contribution of each component of change. Previous work by Van Poppel and Van Ginneken (1985) suggests that the older male and female populations may be experiencing quite different mortality trends. In view of this, particular attention is given to differences in sources of growth for the male and female populations.

2. Components of change

It is possible to identify three components which contribute to changes in the size of the population aged 65 and over and which influence its composition (Siegel and Davidson (1984), Myers (1985)). First, cohort succession plays a key role in determining the growth of