

Census 2011: Ageing in Curaçao

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Introduction

In the contemporary trend of ageing populations all around the globe the population of Curaçao is no exception. In fact, Curaçao shows a very similar pattern of the population ageing process as the more developed countries in the world. A rapid fertility decline coupled with low death rates and increasing longevity are the main ingredients of the global recipe for ageing populations in the more developed regions. Curaçao has pretty much stuck to this recipe resulting in an advanced ageing process of the population.

This article will outline the historical path of the ageing process in Curaçao and moreover put the current situation in perspective by comparing it to other countries and regions in the world.

A selection of the United Nations Population Ageing and Development Indicators is used for this purpose and will be discussed one by one. These indicators are: number of persons aged 60 years or over, proportion of the total population aged 60 years or over, life expectancy at age 60, share of persons aged 80 years or over, sex ratio of older persons, old-age support ratio and proportion of the older population in the labour force. The data used for the indicators are from the six censuses held in Curaçao between 1960 and 2011.

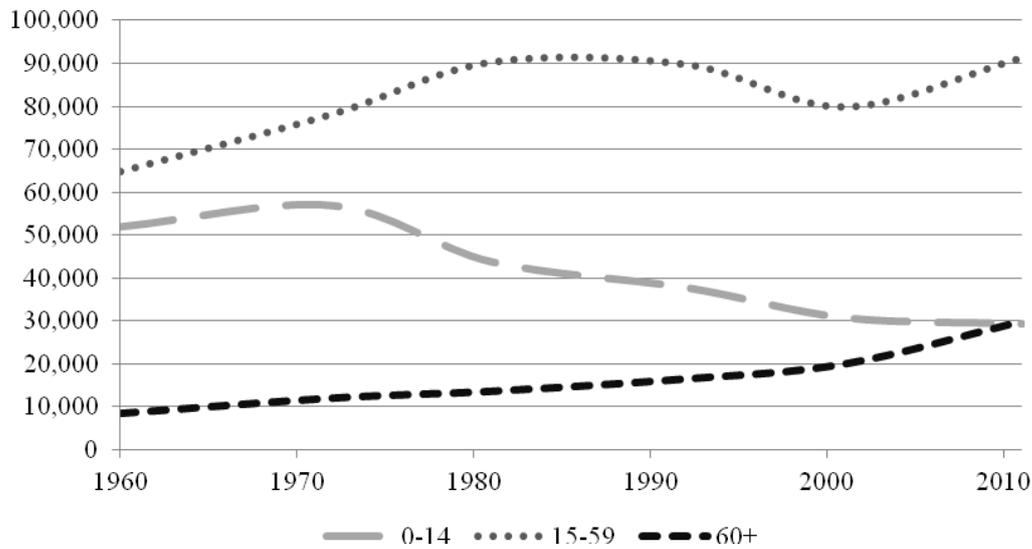
Number of persons aged 60 years or over

The number of persons aged 60 years or over in Curaçao has increased steadily from 1960 to 2001, but the pace of this growth has clearly increased between 2001 and 2011 (figure 1). In ten years time the number of elderly persons²⁰ has grown with almost 10.000 persons, which is almost as much as in the forty years before 2001 (ca. 11.000 persons).

At the same time the number of children (0-14 years) has dropped significantly from a little under 57.000 in 1972 to 29.395 in 2011. For the first time in Curaçao's contemporary history the elderly persons outnumber the children. In comparison, on the world level the surpassing of children by elderly persons is projected to happen in 2047 (UNDESA Population Division, 2012). Aruba has also not reached this point yet, there the number of elderly persons has approached the number of children, but still needs to close a gap of a little over 5.000 persons in 2010 (CBS Aruba, 2011).

²⁰ 'Elderly' or 'older' persons or population refers to persons aged 60 years or over.

Figure 1. Population growth by broad age groups, 1960 – 2011



Proportion of the total population aged 60 years or over

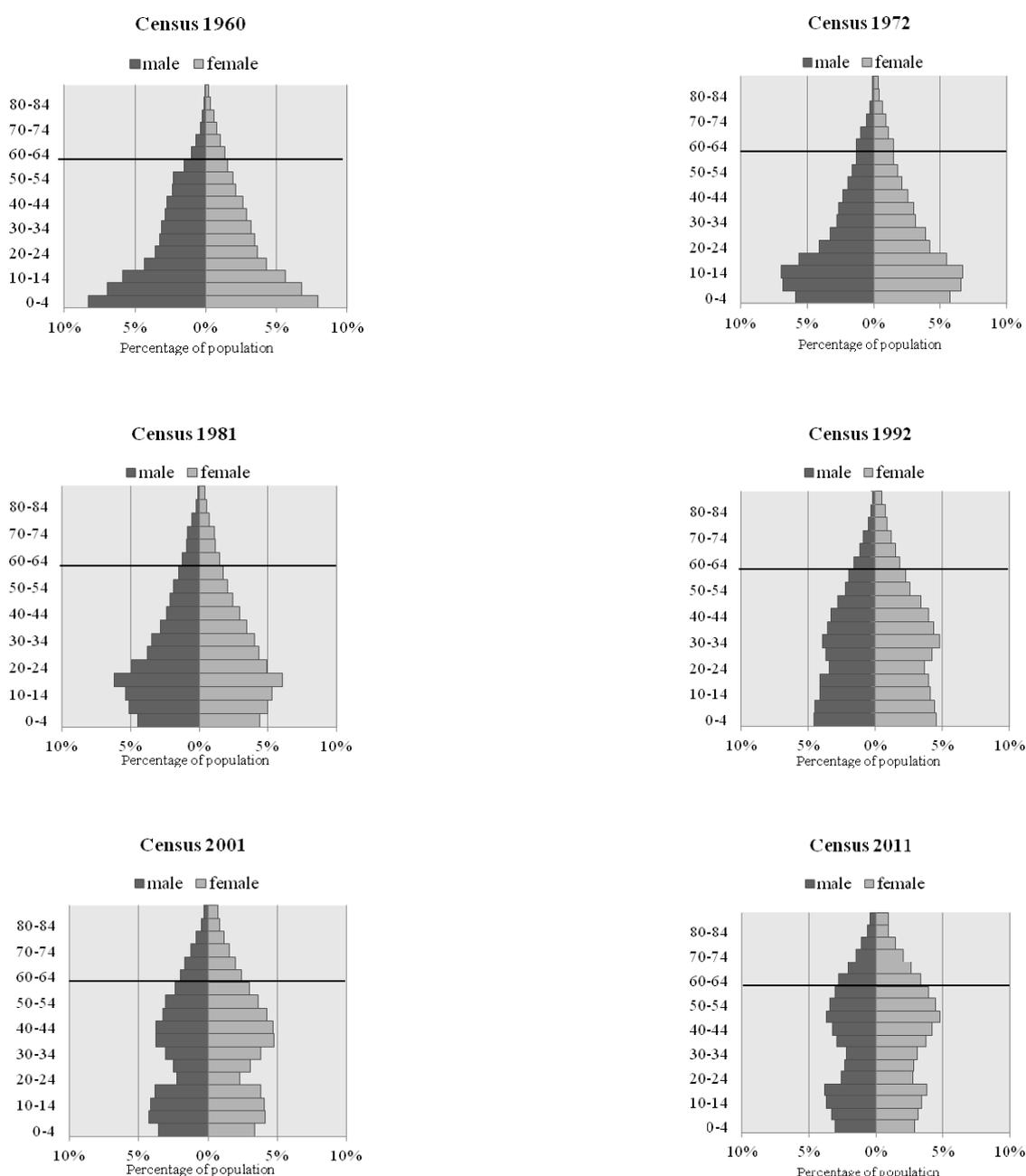
Figure 2 shows the population pyramids of the censuses held between 1960 and 2011 in Curaçao. The pyramids clearly show the transition in age composition the population of Curaçao has passed through. The triangular shape with the large base in 1960, depicting a youthful population, has transformed to a shape with a rather small base and a heavier bulk towards the top of the pyramid. The large bulk of children at the base of the pyramid in 1960, caused by fertility rates as high as 5,2 children per woman, can be seen moving upwards in the pyramids in subsequent decades. Meanwhile the base of the pyramid is getting smaller because of the sharp drop in fertility rates in the 1960s. However, an echo effect of the high fertility of the 1950s and part of the 1960s is visible in the pyramids from 1992 onwards. The children of this high fertility generation start having children of their own creating the bulb at the bottom of the pyramid, between ages 5 and 20. Migration also has its impact on the shape of the pyramids. Especially in the 1990s and the 2000s several waves of emigration have helped creating a gap for the ages 20-34 and also a further reduction of the base of the pyramid, because much of the emigration has taken place among these younger population cohorts. Because the emigrants in these young age-groups were not replaced by immigrants of the same age or by natural inflow from the younger age-groups during these years the pyramid base has reduced in size and the gap for the ages 20-34 has grown.

To illustrate the increase of the proportion of the population aged 60 years or over the horizontal line at age 60 has been drawn in each pyramid. The bars above this line have grown considerably, especially in the last decade. In 1960 6,7 percent of the population belonged to this age group, but in 2011 this has increased to 19,8 percent. In comparison, the proportion of the total population that is 60 years or older is much higher in the more developed regions than in the less developed regions in 2012: one in five persons in Europe; one in nine persons in Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean; and one in 16 persons in Africa. In the Caribbean only Martinique (21%) and the US Virgin Islands (23%) have shares of 20 percent or higher of elderly population (UNDESA Population Division, 2012).

Life expectancy at age 60

Not only is the proportion of elderly persons growing in Curaçao, the elderly persons have experienced an increase in longevity. The life expectancy at birth for females has gone up from 74,4 in 1960 to 80,7 in 2011 while the male life expectancy at birth has increased, albeit less sharp, from 70,4 to 73,9 in the same period. Zooming in on the elderly population the additional years a 60-year old female can expect to live, i.e. life expectancy at age 60, rose from 19,9 years in 1960 to 23,9 years in 2011. The male counterparts aged 60 can expect to live an additional 19,9 years in 2011 as compared to 16,9 years in 1960. For this indicator Curaçao is on par with the Caribbean region and Aruba for example, where women reaching age 60 can respectively expect to live 23 and 22 years more, and men can expect to live 20 and 18 additional years respectively (UNDESA Population Division, 2012).

Figure 2. Age distribution of the population of Curaçao, 1960 – 2011



Share of persons aged 80 years or over

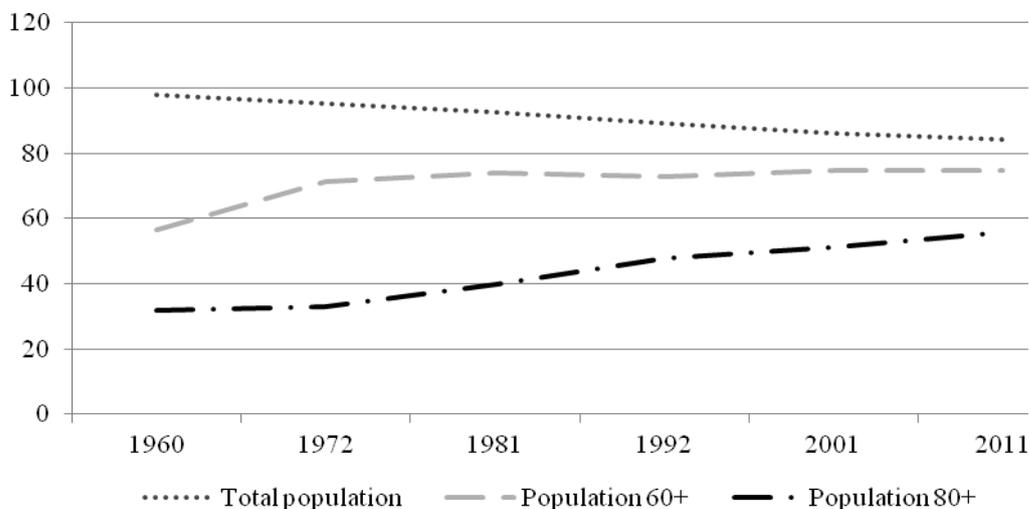
With the increased longevity and the growing proportion of persons aged 60 years or over the share of elderly persons aged 80 years or over has increased as well. In 1960 the 80+ population accounted for 10 percent of the 60+ population. In 2011 the share of 80+ persons within the elderly population has gone up to 15 percent. Curaçao is ahead of Aruba which has a 12 percent share of persons aged 80 years or over among the elderly in 2011 (CBS Aruba, 2011), but behind the Netherlands and the United States that have percentages of 18 and 20 respectively in 2012 (UNDESA Population Division, 2012).

In absolute numbers the population aged 80 years or over has grown from 877 persons in 1960 to 4.466 persons in 2011, an increase of 409 percent. That makes it the fastest growing age group compared to 43 percent growth in the 15-59 cohorts and a 43 percent decline of the youngest cohorts (0-14) in the same period. The population aged 60 years or over as a whole group has experienced a 255 percent growth from 8.399 persons in 1960 to 29.846 persons in 2011.

Sex ratio of older persons

Because women in general outlive men the sex-ratio (number of males per 100 females) becomes lower the older the age groups. While this is evident in populations around the globe, sex-ratio statistics also indicate a faster rate of improvement of old-age mortality (80 years or over) for men than for women worldwide. In other words, men aged 80 years or over are experiencing more improvement in survival rates than women.

Figure 3. Sex ratio of the total population and the older population of Curaçao, 1960-2011



In Curaçao the sex-ratio of the total population stood at 98 men per 100 women in 1960 and has increasingly declined during the 1980s to the 2000s dropping from 93 in 1981 to 84 men per 100 women in 2011 (figure 3). The sex-ratio for the older population (60+) however has remained steady in the period 1981-2011 at around 74 men per 100 women, after an increase from 57 in 1960. On the contrary, the sex-ratio for the 80+ cohorts has gone up from 32 in 1960 to 40 in 1980 and finally to 56 men per 100 women in 2011. These sex-ratios are very similar to Southern-Europe for example, but diverge from the Caribbean average in 2012. In these regions the sex-ratios are respectively 78 (Southern-Europe, 60+) and 56 (Southern-Europe, 80+), and 86 (Caribbean 60+) and 71 (Caribbean 80+). Worldwide the ratio of men to women at older ages is lower in the more developed regions (75 men per 100 women) than in the less developed regions (89 men per 100 women) because commonly women outlive men by a wider margin in the more developed regions (UNDESA Population Division, 2012).

Old-age support ratio

The old-age support ratio is a good indicator of demographic ageing and of the degree of the dependency of elderly persons on the potentially working population. Since 1950, the old-age support ratio, i.e. the number of persons aged 15-64 per person aged 65 years²¹ or over, has decreased significantly worldwide. The ratio has fallen from 12 working-age persons per older person (65+) in 1950 to 8 in 2012, and is projected by the UN to drop to 4 by 2050. Curaçao has already approached this level in 2011 with as much as 4,8 working-age persons per person aged 65 years or over, having dropped from 12,3 in 1960. In 2012 Cuba (5 working-age persons per older person), Guadeloupe (5), Martinique (4), Puerto Rico (5), the US Virgin Islands (4), but also the Netherlands (4) and the United States (5) for example were on the same level as Curaçao. This level corresponds to the more developed regions of the world (4 working-age persons per person). As many younger populations can be found in the less developed regions of the world it is no surprise that the old-age support ratio in the less developed regions is almost three times as high (11 working-age persons per person) than in the more developed regions (UNDESA Population Division, 2012).

Proportion of the older population in the labour force

The proportion of persons aged 60 years or over who are economically active can be indicative for the coverage of social security schemes. In 2012, the proportion of older persons who are economically active in the less developed regions of the world (50% among men and 22% among women) is much higher than in the more developed regions of the world (26% among men and 15% among women). The higher the participation among the elderly, the more likely it is that the social security in a country is limited and pensions received are of relative low value (UNDESA Population Division, 2012). In Curaçao the proportion of the older population that is economically active is 23 percent for men and 13 percent for women in 2011, which is lower than the Caribbean region as a whole (32% among men and 14% among women) (UNDESA Population Division, 2012).

Final remarks

It is clear that the population of Curaçao has reached an advanced stage of ageing, bearing many similarities to the more developed regions of the world. An ever-increasing proportion of the older population, which in itself tends to get older because of a rising life expectancy, combined with a considerable diminished and still decreasing younger population has led to a significant shift in the age structure of the population of Curaçao. In the decades to come this age structure is bound to change even more dramatic mainly because of the large share of persons that are in their forties and fifties and are going to reach the age of sixty soon. This has created and will continue to create a demanding situation for the working age population. The amount of persons the older population depends on has declined significantly over the years and can be expected to decline even more given the current ageing-trends.

The inevitable process of ageing resonates in all layers of society. For one thing it increases the amount of pressure on the countries social security schemes, like the public pensions and the healthcare system, which calls for measures by the government. The adjustment of the retirement age from 60 to 65 years in 2012 and the introduction of a new health insurance scheme the same year are examples of the measures that can be considered by the government. Measures like these tend to stir many debate and emotions, but given the major changes in the age structure of the population of Curaçao it is inevitable that certain government policies need to be reconsidered.

²¹ Other than most ageing indicators the old-age support ratio uses age 65 instead of age 60 as delimiter.

Literature

UNDESA Population Division, 2012. *Population Ageing and Development 2012 (Wall chart)*. [pdf] New York: United Nations. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/2012PopAgeingandDev_WallChart.pdf> [Accessed 7 October 2013].

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