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Facts and Stats

Divorce, Separation and Uncoupling in Canada

Just as families continuously evolve, so do the interpersonal relationships at the heart of family life. Every year, thousands of Canadians come together to form committed family relationships – some of whom decide to raise children together – and sometimes, a variety of reasons may compel them to end their relationship, which can result in diverse, unique and often difficult transitional experiences for the family.

Patterns of coupling or partnering and uncoupling or unpartnering have evolved throughout Canada’s history in response to social, economic, cultural and legal changes. While divorce rates were low for most of the 20th century due to restrictive social norms and legal processes, there has since been an increase in the share of families who have experienced separation, divorce and uncoupling – particularly following the liberalization of divorce through the 1968 Divorce Act and further amendments in 1986.

Whether it’s separation and divorce following a marriage, or the uncoupling of a common-law union, this change can be emotionally, socially, legally and/or financially challenging for family members. Current research shows, however, that the impact on adults and children – including the speed and degree of adjustment – varies widely and is shaped by post-divorce circumstances, access to community programs and services, as well as the availability of information, resources and support during the transition.

A recent study found that as a whole, the impact on the well-being of children experiencing parental separation or divorce is “moderate rather than strong,” since each child reacts to parental divorce in their own way with some but not others showing signs of difficulties. The study notes that as divorce has become more commonplace across generations, the overall stress experienced by family members has likely abated somewhat as it’s no longer highly stigmatized.

While conversations and research on parental separation and divorce in the past often used deficit-based language such as “family breakdown,” this kind of framing is far less common today, perhaps reflecting a growing awareness that families don’t “break” or “end” following marital or common-law union dissolution – rather, they adapt, react and evolve.

In May 2018, the federal government proposed amendments to the Divorce Act to mitigate the adversarial nature of family court proceedings following separation and divorce. These changes are meant to serve the “best interests of the children,” and include defining what these “best interests” are, updating adversarial language such as “custody” and “access” to terms that include “parenting orders” and “parenting time,” establishing clear guidelines for when one parent wants to relocate with a child, making it easier for people to collect support payments, strengthening the capacity of courts to address family violence and compelling lawyers to encourage clients to use family-dispute resolution services, such as mediation.

9.9% and 9% Estimated share of Canadians aged 15 and older in 2016 who were divorced/separated and living common-law and who were divorced/separated and NOT living common-law, respectively.

1 in 5 Proportion of Canadians surveyed in 2011 who reported that their parents are divorced or separated (19%), up from 1 in 10 in 2001 (10%).

15% Proportion of Canadians in 2011 who had experienced divorce or separation in the prior 20 years.

4 in 10 Estimated proportion of marriages in Canada that will end by the 30th year of marriage (41%).
13.7 years Average duration of marriage for Canadians who finalized a divorce in 2008 (most recent data available).^{11}

66% Proportion of divorced Canadians surveyed in 2011 who said they did not have remarriage intentions (23% said they were uncertain).^{12}

8 in 10 Proportion of active divorce cases in 2010–2011^{13} that were uncontested (i.e. divorcing couple agrees on all issues). Uncontested cases move through the civil court system faster than contested cases (median duration of 120 days and 490 days, respectively).^{14}

$1,772 and $15,306 Average total fees (per case) reported by surveyed Canadian lawyers for uncontested and contested divorce cases, respectively, in 2016.^{15}

1/4 Proportion of divorced or separated parents in Canada surveyed in 2011 who had children aged 18 or younger (24%).^{16}

56% Proportion of children aged 24 and under in lone parent families in 2011 who lived with a divorced or separated parent, down from 62% in 2001.^{17,18}

70% and 15% Proportion of separated or divorced mothers and fathers, respectively, who reported in 2011 that their household was the primary residence of their children (time was divided equally for 9% of respondents).^{19}

1 in 5 Proportion of divorced or separated parents with children under 18 in 2011 who were paying some form of financial support for their children – 26% were receiving child support.^{20}

85% and 15% Proportion of separated or divorced mothers and fathers, respectively, surveyed in 2011 who said they were the primary decision maker regarding their child’s health, religion and/or education.^{21,22}

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1 This resource includes the terms coupling and partnering to include the diversity of relationships in Canada. While coupling includes people in two-person dating, common-law and married couples, partnering is broader and can include relationships between more than two people, such as those in polyamorous relationships (the same applies to uncoupling and unpartnering). To learn more about polyamorous relationships, see “Polyamory in Canada: Research on an Emerging Family Structure” (link: https://bit.ly/2MF4jNO) and Polyamory, Diversity and Family Life (link: http://bit.ly/2shZvA).

2 The 1968 Divorce Act introduced “no fault” divorce based on separation of three years or more, which was reduced to one year following amendments in 1986. According to Statistics Canada, the number of divorces has been fairly stable since the early 1990s. Link: https://bit.ly/2KXSjd.


4 Amato notes that “we should keep in mind that in the past, many continuously married couples were not particularly happy. The general availability of divorce has made it easier for people to leave dysfunctional or abusive marriages and seek greater happiness and fulfillment with more compatible partners.” Link: https://bit.ly/2maOvH8.


8 Statistics Canada, Distribution of separated or divorced parents by major decision making role about the health, religion and/or education of their children, Canada, 2017 (GSS Table 19), (page last updated November 30, 2015) Link: https://bit.ly/2C1Swf.


13 Most recent data available from Statistics Canada.

14 Kelly, 2012.


17 This rate has historically fluctuated due to complex and evolving trends, including (but not limited to) the corresponding increase in the share of children living with a “never married” lone parent (from 31% in 2001 to 37% in 2011) and decrease in the share living with a widowed parent (from 7.3% to 6.4%). Rate is similar to the 1971 figure (55%), which climbed over the following two decades to reach 70% in 1991 following the 1986 passage of the revised Divorce Act (which reduced the separation requirement for divorce to one year or more) – the rate has since declined.


21 This is among separated or divorced couples in which only one parent was a primary decision maker (decisions were made together or alternatively by 35% of survey respondents).