

4 Common-law unions are most common in Quebec and Nunavut

Compared with previous generations, far more couples today are choosing to live together without getting married. Younger generations' shift toward living common-law before—and sometimes instead of—getting married may sound unremarkable today since much of this shift occurred decades ago. It nonetheless signifies a major shift in what families look like and how people think about family life.

Individuals are considered to be in a common-law relationship when they cohabitate for a certain period of time (this varies by province or territory), yet they have not formalized their union through legal marriage.¹ In 2021, Canada was home to more than 1.9 million common-law couples, representing nearly one-quarter (22.7%) of all couples.² This is more than triple when they were first counted in the 1981 Census (6.3%).³ Among G7 countries, Canada now has the highest percentage of couples living common-law.⁴ More than one in five people aged 15 and older (22.1%) were living common-law in 2021, nearly four times higher than in 1991 (6.7%).^{5, 6}

Canada's high proportion of common-law couples is driven by the even higher prevalence found in Quebec. In 2021, more than four in 10 couples (42.7%) were common-law, compared with only 16.9%

outside of Quebec.⁷ In addition to having more than double the proportion of couples living common-law, Quebec also saw a much higher increase over time. The highest proportion is in Nunavut, which became the first province or territory in the country with a majority (51.7%) of couples living common-law in 2021.

Living common-law is more prevalent among younger age groups, which reflects an ongoing generational shift. In 2021, nearly one-quarter (23.5%) of 25- to 29-year-olds lived common-law,⁵ up from 14.0% in 1991.⁶ The number of people living common-law decreases after young adulthood older in most parts of Canada. The two exceptions are Quebec and Nunavut, where living common-law is more commonly chosen as an alternative to marriage.⁴

The 2017 General Social Survey asked common-law partners who had indicated that they did not intend to marry their current partner why they did not want to get married. Among those aged 25 to 34, the top two cited responses were that the "current situation is fine as is" (37.8%), followed by "don't believe in the institution of marriage" (24.3%).⁸

The growing proportion of couples choosing common-law over marriage is driven by a



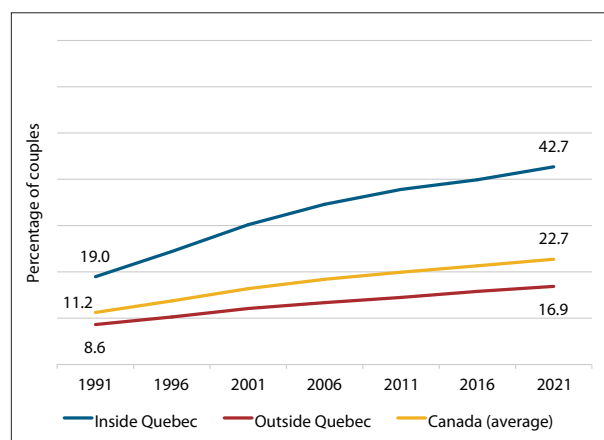
variety of factors, including the declining influence of religion on society, broadened divorce legislation, improved access to contraception, and increasing educational attainment and labour force participation of women. This shift has been most pronounced in Quebec, where the influence of the Catholic Church has declined greatly since the 1960s. The higher prevalence of common-law unions in Nunavut is associated with the characteristics of its population, which is younger and largely Indigenous (84.3% of its population in 2021 were Inuit⁹).

Why this matters

Many people assume that common-law couples have the same rights as married couples. While Canadian law has

increasingly treated both couple types the same, their rights and obligations, as well as the definition of “common-law,” vary across provinces and territories. For example, married people are eligible for spousal support, division of property in the case of separation and divorce, or inheritance in case of death, but the portrait is far more complex for people in common-law relationships. If a common-law couple separates in Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, or Yukon, there is no legal obligation for the partners to divide their property as a married couple.¹⁰ As couples continue to opt for living common-law, issues such as these may affect a growing number of people in Canada.

Percentage of all couples that were common-law, inside Quebec and outside Quebec, 1991-2021



Sources: Statistics Canada. (2008, February 19). Number of children at home (8) and census family structure (7) for the census families in private households of Canada, provinces, territories, census divisions, census subdivisions and dissemination areas, 2006 Census - 20% sample data.¹¹

Statistics Canada. (2013, December 23). Number of children at home (8) and family structure (7A) for census families in private households, for Canada, provinces and territories, 1981 to 2001 censuses - 20% sample data.¹²

Statistics Canada. (2018, May 30). Census family structure (7) and presence and ages of children (15) for census families in private households of Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations, 2016 and 2011 censuses - 100% data.¹³

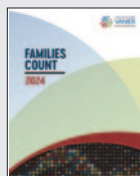
Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Census family structure, presence of children and average number of persons per census family: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations.⁶



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How to cite this document:

Battams, N., & Mathieu, S. (2024). Common-law unions are most common in Quebec and Nunavut. In *Families count 2024*, The Vanier Institute of the Family. <https://vanierinstitute.ca/families-count-2024/common-law-unions-are-most-common-in-Quebec-and-Nunavut>

