

1 Couples are less likely to get married

Across generations, marriage has become less common in Canada. In 2021, more than four in 10 people aged 15 and older were married (44.3%),¹ down from 54.1% in 1991.² The decline in the number of married people across generations can also be seen in the relative proportion of people under and over the age of 50 in couples who were married. In 2021, 67.9% of the population aged 15 to 49 living in couples were married, compared with 86.2% of those over 50 who were in couples.¹

The decline in marriage can also be seen in the crude marriage rate. This is the total number of marriages registered in a given year, divided by the total population. This dropped from 6.1 marriages per 1,000 people in 1991 to 3.9 by 2019.³ In 2020, the rate dropped to a record low of 2.6 per 1,000. That year, there were 98,355 marriages registered in Canada, the lowest recorded since 1938 when the population was much smaller.⁴ This was largely due to barriers and restrictions resulting from COVID-19 public health measures.

Regardless of decreasing marriage rates, couples do continue to enter conjugal

unions as much as in the past. In 2021, 56.9% of the population aged 15 and older were part of a couple, compared with 57.9% in 1921.⁵ But a growing number of couples are now living common-law instead of getting married. This is particularly the case in Quebec and Nunavut, where in 2021 only 57.3% and 48.2% of couples, respectively, were married (vs. 77.3% across Canada).⁶

Marriage is less common among same-gender couples than different-gender couples, partly because marriage between two people of the same sex has only been legal across Canada since 2005.⁹ In 2021, 37.3% of same-gender couples were married, compared with 77.8% of different-gender couples.⁵

There is no single explanation for the decline in the proportion of couples getting married. The increasing preference among younger adults for common-law unions over marriage, population aging, the declining influence of religion in society, and the rising average age at marriage have all contributed to this trend.



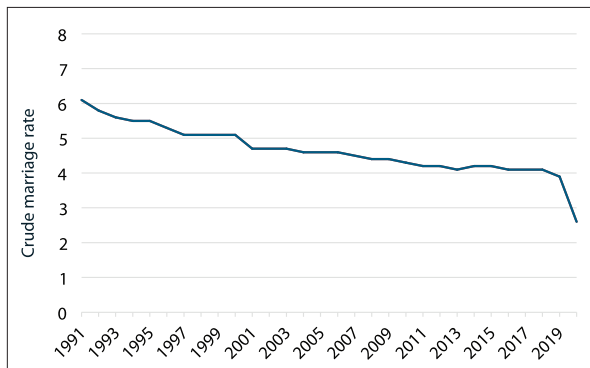
Why this matters

The conjugal situation of couples in Canada has undergone a major evolution over the generations, with an increasing shift from marriage to common-law unions. But it is still the most common couple type. Understanding marriage trends is important because these unions are the context in which a lot of family experiences occur.

The decline in the proportion of couples who get married does not mean that more people are single or alone but that the

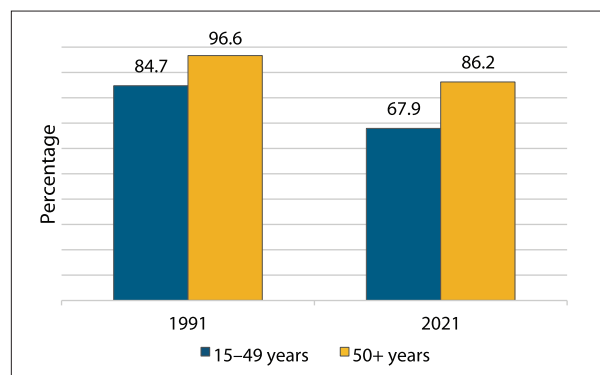
nature of these relationships has continued to evolve alongside social, economic, cultural, and legal changes. Marriage was a norm because it was once seen by many people as the only legitimate means of forming and maintaining a family. For many couples today, marriage is no longer a prerequisite to living together or having children. The growing share of common-law unions has further diversified the pathways people can take to form a family.

Number of marriages per 1,000 population (crude marriage rate), Canada, 1991-2020



Source: Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Number of marriages and nuptiality indicators.³

Percentage of total population aged 15 to 49 and 50 and older in couples who were married, Canada, 1991 and 2021



Sources: Statistics Canada. (1992). Population by age groups (21a) and sex (3), showing marital status (6) - Canada, provinces and territories, federal electoral districts and enumeration areas.⁷

Statistics Canada. (2023, March 29). Marital status, age group and gender: Canada, provinces and territories and economic regions.¹

³ What had been prohibited before 2005 was marriage between two persons of the same (legal) sex, regardless of their gender identity/expression. As understandings of gender have evolved, Statistics Canada replaced the term "same sex" with "same gender" in terminology related to couples and families.



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References

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- ⁷ Statistics Canada. (1992). Table E9102 Population by age groups (21a) and sex (3), showing marital status (6) – Canada, provinces and territories, federal electoral districts and enumeration areas. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/English/census91/data/tables/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=1&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=1&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=86&PRID=0&PTYPE=4&S=0&SHOWALL=No&SUB=0&Temporal=1991&THEME=101&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF>



Families Count 2024 is a publication of the Vanier Institute of the Family that provides accurate and timely information on families and family life in Canada. Written in plain language, it features chapters on diverse topics and trends that have shaped families in Canada. Its four sections (Family Structure, Family Work, Family Identity, and Family Wellbeing) are guided by the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#).

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