

2 Couples are marrying later in life

In previous generations, marriage was often seen as a precursor to family life, and for many it still is. Since the 1970s, couples have become less likely to marry, and a growing proportion are choosing to live common-law. Data show those who “tie the knot” today—whether or not it is for the first time—are doing so later in life.

In 2021, nearly six in 10 people in Canada (56.9%) aged 15 and older were in married or common-law couples.¹ More than three-quarters (77%) of all couples living together in 2021 were married, down from 94% in 1981.² In 2020, the average age of people who married was 34.8 years, up 3.5 years from 31.3 years in 1994.³ During this period, the average age of those who married for the first time also increased, from 27.8 to 31.2 years.

Age-specific marriage rates provide additional insights into the timing of marriage. The rates show a decline among all age groups over the last three decades, particularly among people under 30. The steepest decline in marriage rates in Canadian history took place during 2020, when public health measures aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19 closed public gathering spaces.²

A variety of social, demographic, and cultural factors have contributed to couples marrying later in life. These factors are also driving a similar shift with the later timing of other milestones, such as moving out of the parental home, having children, and buying a home. Thirty years ago, a driving factor was the growing number of remarriages that occurred later in life. The liberalization of divorce laws in 1968 resulted in an increase in the number of older people remarrying after divorcing their former spouse²—marriages that increased the average age at marriage. Today, the growing popularity of common-law unions has become a main driver of later marriages.

Furthermore, more young people are pursuing higher education and establishing their careers before considering marriage. Economic factors, such as high prices for housing and postsecondary education, make it more challenging for young couples to save enough money to establish a household and feel financially secure before getting married. Many young adults prioritize personal growth, self-discovery, and finding the right partner before making a long-term commitment like marriage.

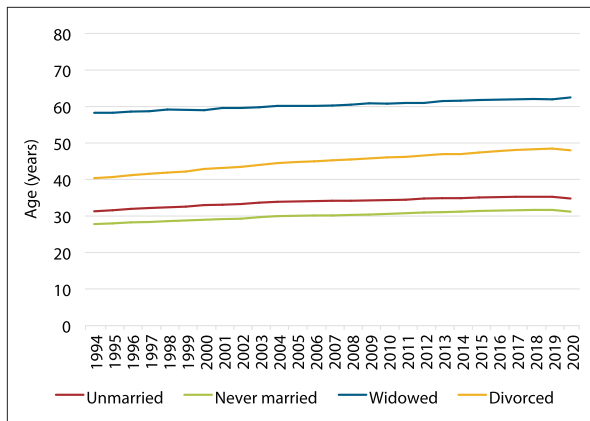


Why this matters

Since marriage often came before family life in the past, it happened at much younger ages. Many couples today are putting off marriage because they want to pursue other aspirations first. Even among those who do choose to marry, most young people now prefer to live together with

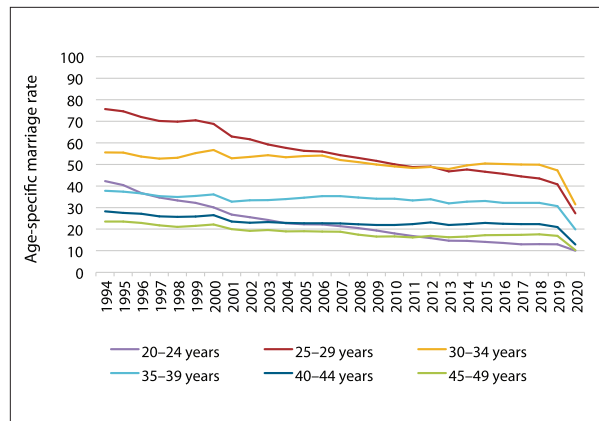
their partners as a way of “testing the waters” before committing to marriage, which has pushed up the average age at marriage. Since the risk of divorce decreases the older one gets married, this shift could result in longer lasting marriages, on average.⁴

Average age at marriage, by legal marital status prior to marriage, Canada, 1994–2020



Source: Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Mean age and median age at marriage, by legal marital status.³

Marriage rate per 1,000 unmarried persons, by age group, Canada, 1994–2020



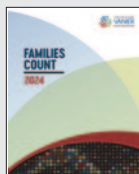
Source: Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Number of persons who married in a given year and marriage rate per 1,000 unmarried persons, by age group and legal marital status.⁵



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References

- ¹ Statistics Canada. (2023, March 29). Table 98-10-0132-01 Marital status, age group and gender: Canada, provinces and territories and economic regions. <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810013201-eng>
- ² Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). "I don't": Historic decline in new marriages during the first year of the pandemic. *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221114/dq221114b-eng.htm>
- ³ Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Table 39-10-0056-01 Mean age and median age at marriage, by legal marital status. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3910005601-eng>
- ⁴ Clark, W., & Crompton, S. (2006, June 28). Till death do us part? The risk of first and second marriage dissolution. *Canadian Social Trends*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-008-x/2006001/9198-eng.htm>
- ⁵ Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Table 39-10-0057-01 Number of persons who married in a given year and marriage rate per 1,000 unmarried persons, by age group and legal marital status. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3910005701-eng>



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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