

3 Divorce rates have declined since the early 1990s

Divorce rates are influenced by social, economic, legal, and cultural trends. From the late 1960s to the late 1980s, the number of divorces in Canada increased sharply. This was driven by a variety of factors, including decreasing stigma against divorce and the increasing economic independence of women. Equally important was the creation of the *Divorce Act, 1968* and amendments made in 1986 that made it easier to obtain a divorce. Since the early 1990s, however, divorce rates have declined notably.

The number of divorces has fallen since the early 1990s, from nearly 79,000 in 1991 to 57,000 by 2019.¹ In 2020, nearly 43,000 divorces were granted in Canada—the lowest number since 1973. This decline was largely due to disruptions in the court-based process of granting divorces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The divorce rate (i.e., the number of persons who divorce in a given year per 1,000 married persons) also declined during this period. This dropped from 12.7 per 1,000 married people in 1991 to 7.5 per 1,000 married people in 2019, before hitting a record low of 5.6 per 1,000 married people in 2020 during the early months of the pandemic.²

The aging of the married population is key to understanding the decline in divorce rates over time. Divorce rates tend to be lower among older age groups. In 2020, there were 5.2 divorces per 1,000 married persons for those aged 50 to 64, compared with 8.5 per 1,000 among those aged 15 to 34.¹ Although the divorce rate is higher for younger age groups, it has also declined in recent years.

Younger couples today tend to follow different trajectories than previous generations regarding marital status. In recent decades, a growing share of younger people have been choosing common-law unions rather than marriage. Since divorces apply only to married and not to common-law unions, a decreasing proportion of couples getting married in a population inevitably leads to a lower number of divorces within that population.³

Why this matters

Divorce statistics do not provide a complete picture of relationships ending. In 2021, more than one in five (22.7%) couple relationships in Canada were common-law.³ This rate continues to increase and is much higher in some parts of the country,



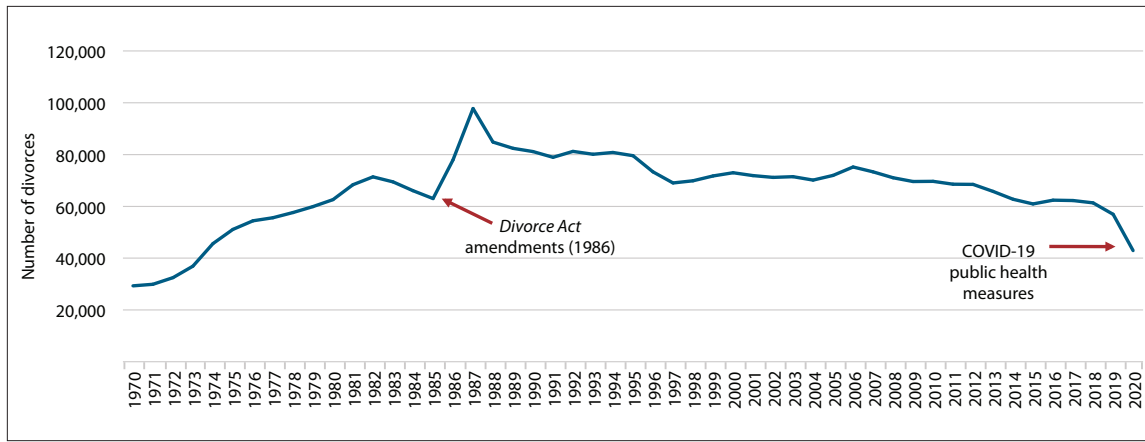
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particularly in Quebec and Nunavut. When common-law couples end their relationship, it is not recorded in divorce data.

Even so, divorce statistics are valuable indicators since most couples are married, and therefore may experience a divorce in

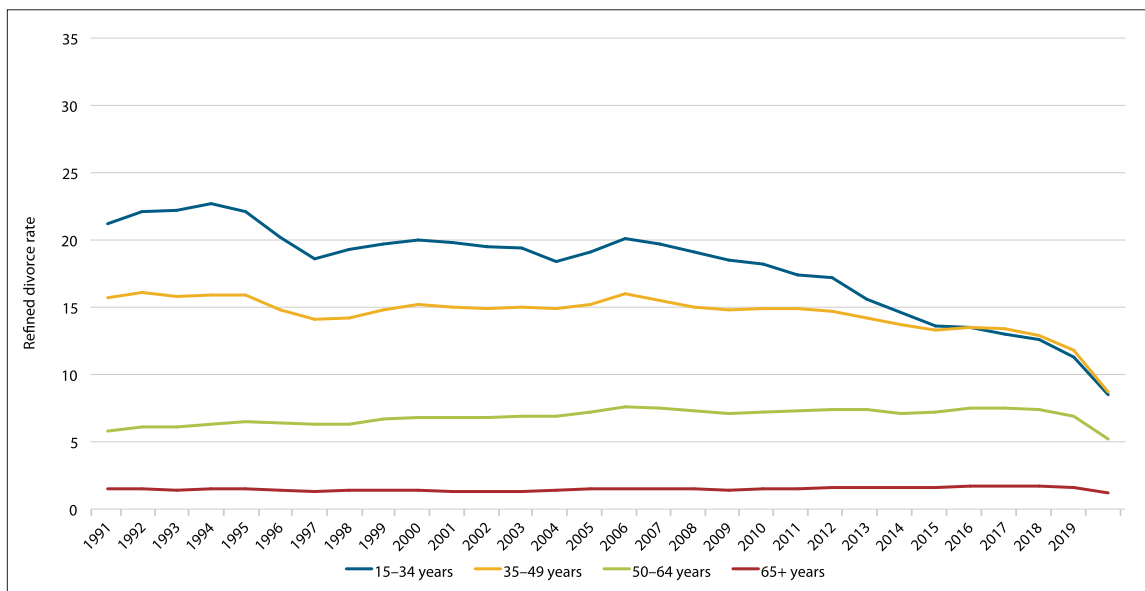
their lifetime. Currently, they are some of the only statistics to show that a relationship has ended. Understanding these trends is important because they provide unique insights on topics at the heart of family life, such as fertility, finances, housing, and caregiving.

Number of divorces, Canada, 1970-2020



Source: Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Number of divorces and divorce indicators.²

Number of persons who divorced per 1,000 married persons (refined divorce rate) by age group, Canada, 1991-2020



Source: Statistics Canada. (2022, March 9). A fifty-year look at divorces in Canada, 1970 to 2020. *The Daily*.¹



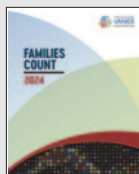
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¹ Statistics Canada. (2022, March 9). A fifty-year look at divorces in Canada, 1970 to 2020. *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220309/dq220309a-eng.htm>

² Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Table 39-10-0051-01 Number of divorces and divorce indicators. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3910005101-eng>

³ Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). State of the union: Canada leads the G7 with nearly one-quarter of couples living common law, driven by Quebec. *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220713/dq220713b-eng.htm>



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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