



L'Institut Vanier de la famille

**VANIER**

The Vanier Institute of the Family

# FAMILIES COUNT

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## 2024



L'Institut Vanier de la famille

**VANIER**

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# **FAMILY STRUCTURE**

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# Family structure: the shape of families and family life

One of the lenses of the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#) focuses on family structure. This lens represents the combination of relationships that make up a family or family household. It highlights how people are linked to form and grow families through kinship or other bonds that are recognized in legislation or social convention.

Focusing on family structure allows us to shed light on how laws and policies about family formation and dissolution reflect societal beliefs about who makes up a family. Importantly, it also sets boundaries around the rights and obligations that flow from these connections.

Family structure has several dimensions, such as whether a family has children, whether a family is centred around one parent and their child(ren) or if it is a couple family, and whether couple families are married or living common-law. It also explores different family household types and living arrangements, such as in multigenerational households, stepfamily households, and those comprised of grandparents and grandchildren without

the presence of a parent (i.e., skip-generation households).

The family structure lens looks at how families grow, whether through childbirth, adoption, or surrogacy. It examines how family structures and relationships change throughout the life course, whether through marriage, divorce, or forming a stepfamily, or the death of family members. It investigates less common ways that people “do relationships,” whether as couples “living apart together” in separate households, or in a polyamorous relationship comprised of more than two people.

Over the last half-century, family structures have become considerably more diverse, driven by social, economic, cultural, and environmental changes. Some of these changes have contributed to family transitions happening later in life than in the past, such as moving out of the parental home, getting married, and having children. Chapters in this section will provide updated portraits of family structures and will examine how changing contexts have shaped families and family life in Canada.



# 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%),<sup>1</sup> down from 54.1% in 1991.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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).<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> In 2021, 37.3% of same-gender couples were married, compared with 77.8% of different-gender couples.<sup>5</sup>

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.



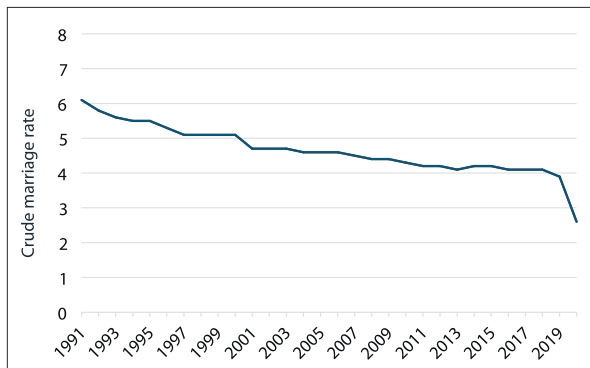
## Why this matters

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

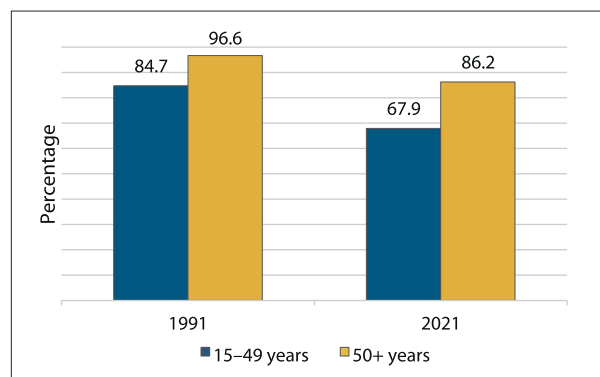
nature of these relationships has continued to evolve alongside social, economic, cultural, and legal changes. Marriage was a norm because it was once seen by many people as the only legitimate means of forming and maintaining a family. For many couples today, marriage is no longer a prerequisite to 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.<sup>3</sup>

**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.<sup>7</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.



# 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.<sup>1</sup> More than three-quarters (77%) of all couples living together in 2021 were married, down from 94% in 1981.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the average age of people who married was 34.8 years, up 3.5 years from 31.3 years in 1994.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 spouse<sup>4</sup>—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.



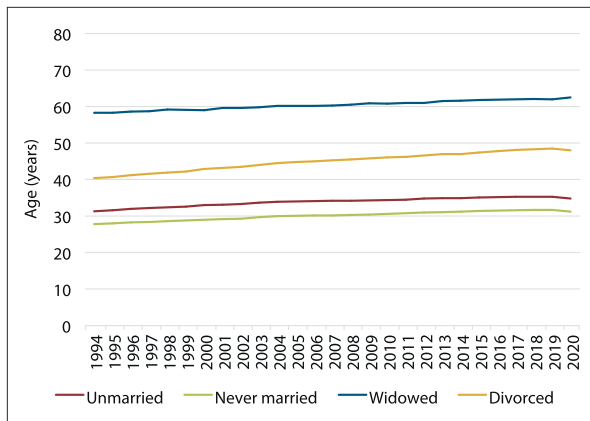


## Why this matters

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

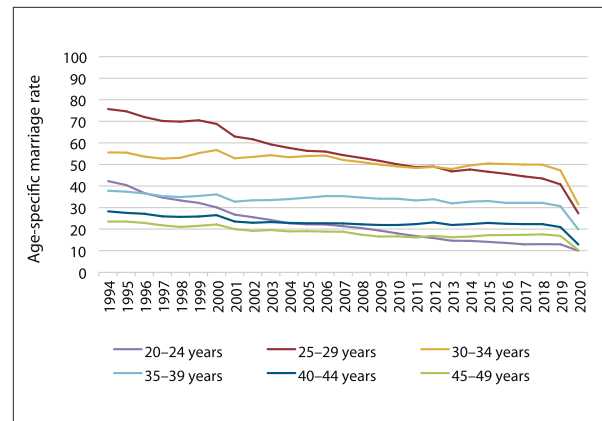
their partners as a way of “testing the waters” before committing to marriage, which has pushed up the average age at marriage. Since the risk of divorce decreases the older one gets married, this shift could result in longer lasting marriages, on average.<sup>9</sup>

**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.<sup>8</sup>

**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.<sup>10</sup>



# 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

## 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.<sup>5</sup> This rate continues to increase and is much higher in some parts of the country,



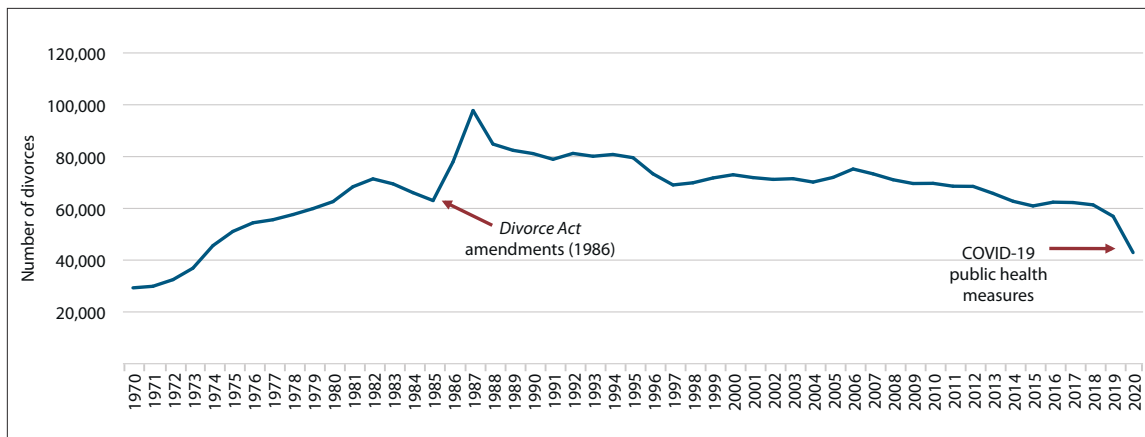
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particularly in Quebec and Nunavut. When common-law couples end their relationship, it is not recorded in divorce data.

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

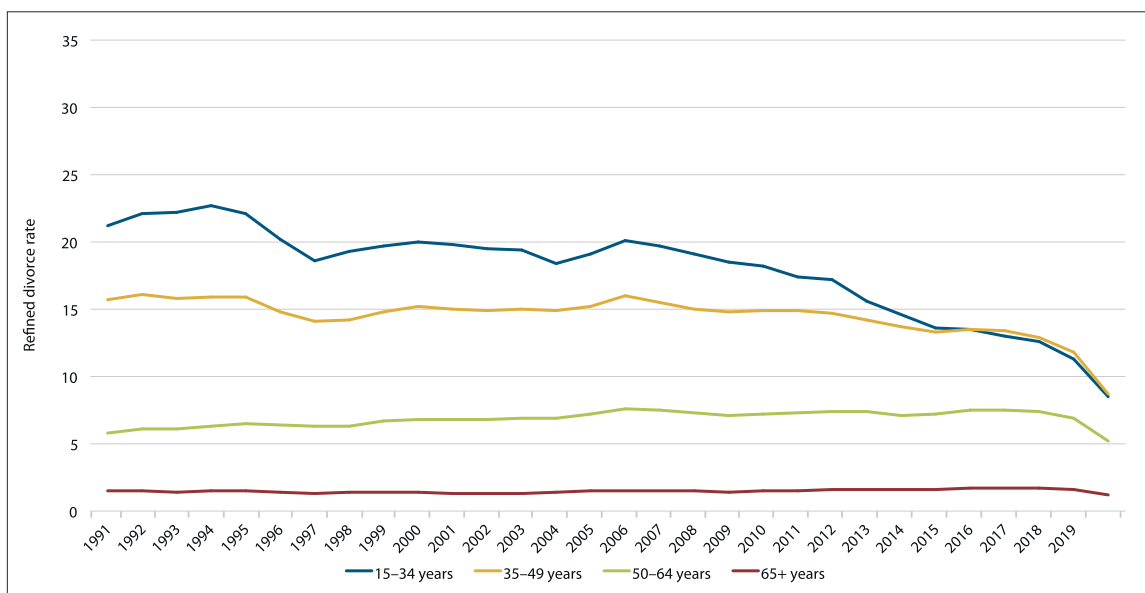
their lifetime. Currently, they are some of the only statistics to show that a relationship has ended. Understanding these trends is important because they provide unique insights on topics at the heart of family life, such as fertility, finances, housing, and caregiving.

## Number of divorces, Canada, 1970-2020



Source: Statistics Canada. (2022, November 14). Number of divorces and divorce indicators.<sup>12</sup>

## 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*.<sup>11</sup>



# 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 cohabit for a certain period of time (this varies by province or territory), yet they have not formalized their union through legal marriage.<sup>13</sup> In 2021, Canada was home to more than 1.9 million common-law couples, representing nearly one-quarter (22.7%) of all couples.<sup>14</sup> This is more than triple when they were first counted in the 1981 Census (6.3%).<sup>15</sup> Among G7 countries, Canada now has the highest percentage of couples living common-law.<sup>5</sup> 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%).<sup>1,2</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>1</sup> up from 14.0% in 1991.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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%).<sup>17</sup>

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



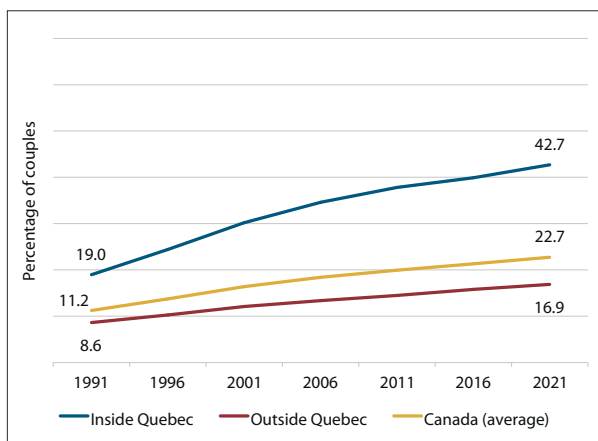
variety of factors, including the declining influence of religion on society, broadened divorce legislation, improved access to contraception, and increasing educational attainment and labour force participation of women. This shift has been most pronounced in Quebec, where the influence of the Catholic 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 Inuit<sup>18</sup>).

## 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>



# 5 Living apart is increasingly common among couples

Approximately one in 10 people in Canada are in an intimate relationship but do not live with their partner, in what is known as a living apart together (LAT) couple.<sup>23</sup> Also known as non-cohabitation, LAT is both a living arrangement and one of the many forms of structural diversity found among families in Canada. Researchers have paid growing attention to LAT couples as couples have become increasingly diverse and this living arrangement becomes more common.

Data from the 2017 General Social Survey (GSS) show that nearly 1.5 million people aged 25 to 64 were in a couple<sup>a</sup> with someone living in a different residence.<sup>23</sup> This accounted for 9% of all people in couples, up from 6% in 2006. Living apart together is most common among younger age groups: among those in couples, 20% of 25- to 34-year-olds, 7% of 35- to 54-year-olds, and 5% of 55- to 64-year-olds lived apart in 2017.

Among those in LAT couples in 2017, 15% said that they had never considered living together, while 34% said it was a choice to live apart.<sup>23</sup> Just over half (51%) cited “other circumstances”<sup>b</sup> as the reason they did not live together, which included schooling, financial situations, and work.

There are many reasons why couples may choose to continue living apart, though it is often a transitional phase that eventually leads to living together. According to the 2011 GSS, seven in 10 people in LAT couples said that they intended to live together eventually, while 15% were uncertain and 14% said they did not intend to live together (this data is not available for 2017).<sup>24</sup> The proportion who intended to live together decreased with age, from 83% of 20- to 24-year-olds in LAT relationships to only 28% for those aged 60 and older.<sup>a</sup>

In 2011, the most frequently cited reason among this group for choosing to live separately was that they were “not yet ready for living together” (48%), indicating that their LAT status was transitional. Nearly three in 10 people (28%) who chose to live in an LAT couple said they did so to “keep independence.”<sup>a</sup>

## Why this matters

Couples living apart is by no means a new phenomenon, although it has become more commonplace in recent decades. LAT couples are more frequent among young adults as they navigate school, work, and social life. People who have previously been



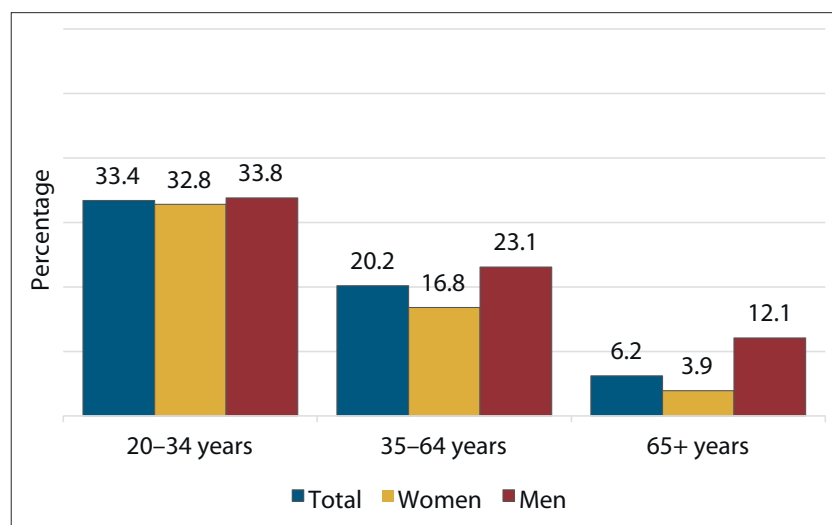
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married may wish to maintain financial autonomy and avoid intertwining their debt or wealth with a new partner, or they may simply not feel any pressure to live together.

Regardless of their age, many people who choose to live apart together do so to

experience the connection and intimacy of being in a couple while maintaining the independence of living apart. There may be important considerations that need to be managed or otherwise addressed by couples living apart, such as how caregiving is provided across households.<sup>25</sup>

## Proportion of the population living alone in a living apart together (LAT) relationship, by age group and gender, Canada, 2017



Source: Tang, J., Galbraith, N., & Truong, J. (2019, March 6). Living alone in Canada. *Insights on Canadian Society*.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Includes those in living-apart-together relationships who were married, single (never married), widowed, divorced, or separated.

<sup>b</sup> A breakdown of the percentage of respondents citing these examples is not available.





# 6 Polyamorous families have broadened family law

Polyamorous families are one of the growing number of diverse family structures in Canada. Polyamory is a form of consensual non-monogamy (CNM). This umbrella term describes any type of intimate relationship in which the partners allow sexual and/or emotional relationships outside their couple relationship.<sup>27</sup> While some of these relationship types are focused on the partners allowing for sexual experiences outside the couple without romantic or emotional attachments, polyamory is distinguished from other CNM relationship types in that it allows for them.

Like all relationships, polyamorous relationships are diverse. The specific structures, the types of relationships (e.g., sexual and/or romantic, regular, or infrequent), and the roles and expectations within can vary greatly depending on the preferences of the people involved. Some polyamorous families are centred around long-term, committed relationships with two or more people, while others may have a mix of short-term and long-term relationships with varying degrees of intimacy and commitment.<sup>28</sup>

Polyamorous relationships may include—but do not require—a married or common-law couple, but Canadian law does not recognize intimate relationships between more than two people. Since polyamorous relationships

are not counted in the Census nor included in the definition of a census family household, there is a data gap in their prevalence and composition. Surveys have shown that approximately one in five people in Canada and the United States have practised consensual non-monogamy at some point, with young adults more likely to have done so.<sup>27</sup> Research shows that sexual minorities are more likely to practise CNM than heterosexual people.<sup>29</sup>

Polyamorous families are increasingly being recognized in Canadian law. This has resulted from legal cases in which more than two people in a polyamorous relationship shared parental responsibilities but faced difficulties because their family structure was not being recognized in most law or policies. For example, the *Divorce Act* defines “spouse” as “either of two persons who are married to each other,” while the *Civil Marriage Act* provides that marriage is “the lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others.”<sup>30</sup>

Several court cases in recent years have broadened parental rights to also include families with more than two parents and addressed the exclusion of polyamorous families from Canadian law. In 2018, three unmarried adults in a relationship in Newfoundland and Labrador were declared legal parents of a child born within their polyamorous family. Because the provincial





*Children's Law Act* did not allow for more than two people to be named as the legal parents of a child, only two could be listed on the child's birth certificate. In his ruling, Justice Robert Fowler of the Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court's family division said that "Society is continuously changing and family structures are changing along with it.<sup>31</sup> This must be recognized as a reality and not as a detriment to the best interests of the child."

In 2021, a British Columbia court ruled that a second mother in a polyamorous family be added to a child's birth certificate. Justice Sandra Wilkinson echoed Fowler's ruling, stating "I find that there is a gap in the [*Family Law Act*<sup>32</sup>]... Put bluntly, the legislature did not contemplate polyamorous families." She said that it was in the "best interests [of the child] to have all of his parents legally recognized as such."

## Why this matters

This lack of alignment between the diversity of families and the laws that affect them can have an impact on wellbeing; these families often must navigate and interact with systems and institutions that were not designed to support them. This was underscored in a 2021 study in which polyamorous parents in Canada who had recently given birth (or been a partner to someone who did) reported experiencing conflict with, or exclusion from, aspects of social systems designed for monogamous couples/families.<sup>33</sup>

Other research shows that parents in polyamorous families also report challenges and difficulties regarding parenting and family

dynamics, including social acceptance and legal protection, coming out to children, time management, and reconciling family obligations with personal needs.<sup>27</sup> Some of these issues may dissipate in future generations if greater awareness and discussion act to reduce stigma and/or if family law continues to become more inclusive of diverse family structures. Many parents in polyamorous families also cited strengths of their family structure, such as having a larger support network for themselves and their children.

Despite the small body of research on polyamorous families in Canada, there is growing awareness and discussion of non-traditional relationship types, including polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamy. Polyamorous families are just one of many forms of structural diversity that make families unique. The struggles for legal recognition of parents in these families highlight how laws and policies often trail social change. It remains to be seen how these developments may reshape or otherwise impact family justice policies, legislation, and training for service providers.<sup>34</sup> Further research will play an important role in strengthening understanding of polyamorous families and ensuring they are included in laws and policies.



Different versions of the pride flag, designed by Red Howell in 2022 (left),<sup>35</sup> and by Jim Evans in 1995 (right).<sup>36</sup>



# 7 Young adults are more likely to live with parents

Young adults have become more likely to live with parents over the last 30 years. Census data show that, in 2021, nearly half (45.8%) of those aged 20 to 29 lived with at least one parent.<sup>37</sup> Living with parents into young adulthood is done out of necessity, out of preference, or both.<sup>38</sup> In 1991, 32.1% of those in their twenties lived with parents.<sup>39</sup> This includes both young adults who never left and those who returned home after living elsewhere.

As was the case 30 years ago, men were more likely than women in their twenties to live with parents in 2021 (49.4% vs. 42.0%, respectively).<sup>37</sup> Men (64.6%) and women (59.3%) aged 20 to 24 were more likely to live with parents than those aged 25 to 29 (35.2% and 26.7%, respectively).

Across provinces and territories, the highest percentages of people in their twenties living with parents in 2021 were in Nunavut (54.7%) and Ontario (53.3%).<sup>37</sup> These were the only provinces/territories above the national average. Living with parents was least commonly reported among those living in the Yukon (33.8%), Nova Scotia (36.4%), and Saskatchewan (36.9%).

Several factors contribute to these geographical differences. Housing often

plays a role. The availability and adequacy of housing has been a long-standing issue in Nunavut, for example, where the highest percentage of young adults live with parents. In large urban centres like Vancouver and Toronto, the cost of renting or buying a home is a driving factor for young adults living with parents.

Compared with rural areas, large urban centres are also home to a greater proportion of immigrant families, who are more likely to live with parents.<sup>38</sup> Data from the 2011 National Household Survey showed that immigrant young adults in their twenties were more likely than non-immigrants to live with their parents (50% vs. 42%).<sup>39</sup>

### Why this matters

Living with a parent can be a valuable source of emotional, logistical, and financial support. This is especially true when pursuing education, after a relationship break-up or separation, when there are fewer job opportunities, or when there are economic disruptions. Living with parents can be a strategy for dealing with low employment earnings, job loss, or the high cost of living. Others may choose this living arrangement to provide or receive care across generations.



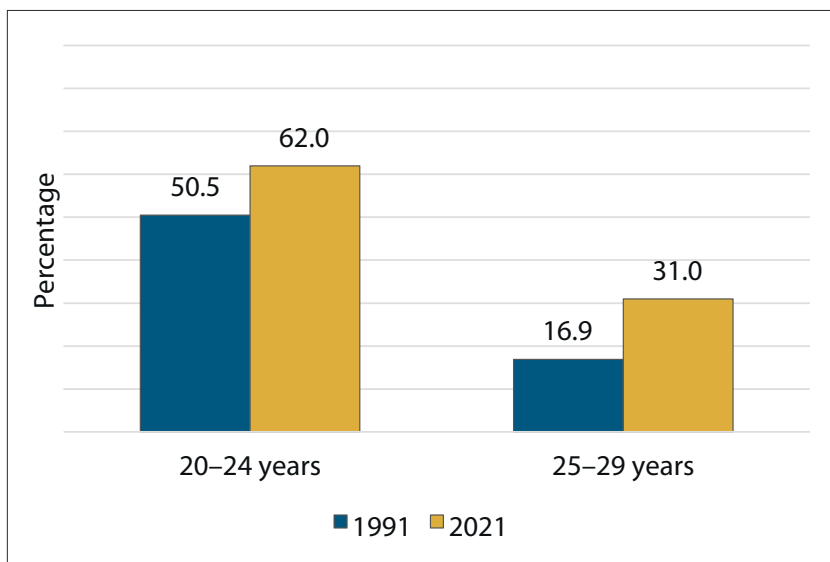
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Indeed, the most recent data on the topic show that, in 2012, 9.0% of young adults aged 20 to 34 who were usually living with their parent(s) were the primary caregiver for one or both parents.<sup>40</sup>

Several factors may explain the increase in the number of young adults living with their parents, including the higher percentage of

young people now pursuing postsecondary education, whose student debt often results in greater economic dependence. Living with a parent also does not come with the same stigma it used to in previous generations, which removes a social deterrent from choosing this living arrangement.

**Percentage of the population aged 20 to 29 living with at least one parent, by age group, Canada, 1991 and 2021**



Sources: Milan, A. (2016, June 15). Diversity of young adults living with their parents. *Insights on Canadian Society*.<sup>39</sup>

Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Census family status and household living arrangements, presence of parent in household, age group and gender: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations.<sup>37</sup>



# 8 Multigenerational households are one of the fastest growing household types

Multigenerational households (those housing three or more generations) have never been a dominant living arrangement in Canada. However, they have become one of the fastest growing household types in recent decades.

In 2021, there were more than 442,000 multigenerational households in Canada,<sup>41</sup> home to 2.4 million people, or 6.4% of the total population.<sup>42</sup> These households have grown in number by 21.2% since 2011—much higher than the overall increase of 12.4% observed among all households.<sup>41</sup> A growing share of children under 15 are living with grandparents, from 8.5% in 2011 to 9.1% in 2021 (93.3% of whom were living in multigenerational households).<sup>42</sup>

Data from the 2021 Census show that Indigenous and immigrant families—two fast-growing population groups—are more likely than others to live in multigenerational households. Provinces and territories with relatively higher proportions of Indigenous and/or immigrant children under 15 had the highest percentage of children who lived with grandparents. This included Nunavut (21.3%), British

Columbia (13.1%), Ontario (11.8%), and the Northwest Territories (9.4%).<sup>43</sup> Census metropolitan areas<sup>a</sup> with the highest proportion of multigenerational households were also home to some of the highest percentages of immigrants in the country, such as in Abbotsford-Mission (22%), Brampton (28%), and Markham (23%).

Among children under age five, 10.4% lived with at least one grandparent in 2021.<sup>43</sup> This proportion was more than twice as high among First Nations (19.7%) and Inuit (24.6%) children than among non-Indigenous children (9.8%). Among the Métis children in this age group, 9.4% lived with at least one grandparent.

The higher likelihood of living in a multigenerational household also reflects the fewer options immigrant and Indigenous families may have to choose from. Most immigrant families first arrive in major urban centres, which also tend to have the highest housing prices. In 2021, multigenerational households were the most common living arrangement among First Nations people living in crowded housing (34.5%).<sup>44</sup>



## Why this matters

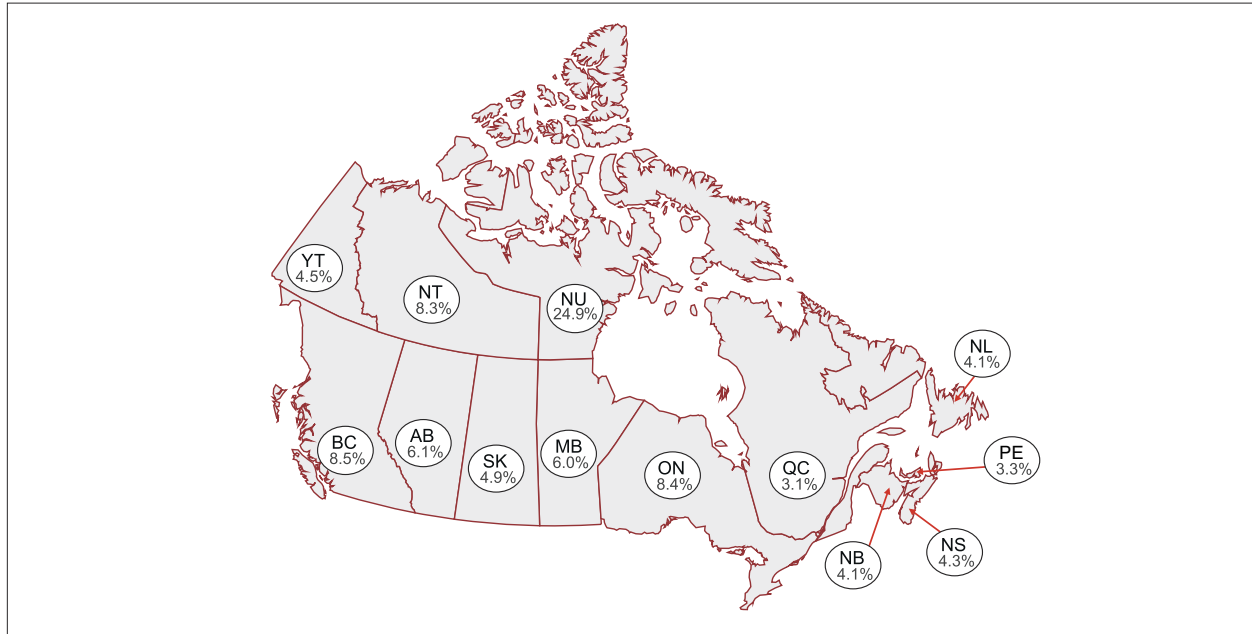
Some families live in multigenerational households because it can help with care and caregiving between generations. Multigenerational households often include someone with an activity limitation.<sup>45</sup> In addition, many grandparents who live with their grandchildren provide care when the parents are at work, at school, or running errands. This can help families with certain childcare costs, something with which many parents struggle.

There are many complex reasons for the increase in multigenerational households. Through income-pooling, the cost-saving advantages in these households can be important for recent immigrants

and their families as they adapt to their new country and build connections. Some families may also already have a cultural preference for living with multiple generations. Families from all backgrounds may also choose to live in multigenerational households when they include new and expectant parents.

Even so, multigenerational living is not for everyone, and living with multiple generations sometimes happens out of necessity, not choice. This can result in unsuitable living arrangements, such as crowded housing, which is known to affect wellbeing.<sup>46</sup>

### Percentage of the population living in a multigenerational household, Canada, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Census family status and household living arrangements, household type of person, age group and gender: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>a</sup> A census metropolitan area is a large urban centre with a population of at least 100,000 with 50% living in the core.



# 9 Pathways to becoming a stepfamily have evolved

Stepfamilies have always been a part of Canada's family landscape, but the circumstances leading to their formation have changed across generations. Similar to a shift that has occurred among one-parent families, stepfamilies used to typically form after the death of a spouse or partner. In today's context of relatively higher divorce rates and lower mortality (particularly maternal mortality), they now usually form after divorce or separation.<sup>47</sup>

The 2021 Census data showed there were more than 500,000 stepfamilies in Canada.<sup>48</sup> A stepfamily is a couple family with children that contains at least one child (biological or adopted) of only one of the spouses/partners whose birth or adoption preceded the current relationship. The spouses/partners in stepfamilies can be married or living common-law.

In 2021, 8.4% of all couple families with children of any age were stepfamilies, down slightly from 9.0% in 2011.<sup>48</sup> Nearly four in 10 (39%) same-gender couples with children of any age in 2021 were stepfamilies, compared with 12% of different-gender couples with children.<sup>5</sup>

Stepsiblings are defined in the Census as siblings who live in the same household but do not have the same birth or adoptive parents. Half-siblings, on the other hand, are siblings who live in the same household and share one common birth or adoptive parent.<sup>a</sup> In 2021, approximately two-thirds (65.2%) of children aged 0 to 14 in stepfamilies had at least one half- or stepsibling.<sup>38</sup> The remaining 37.5% had neither.

Among couples with children, those living in a common-law relationship in 2021 were more than four times as likely to be stepfamilies (31.0%) as their married counterparts with children (7.3%).<sup>48</sup> This suggests that parents may prefer to live common-law when they re-partner.

## Why this matters

Becoming a stepfamily is a significant life change that affects all family members. Spouses or partners take on the role of stepparents, children gain new siblings, and a relocation to a different home often occurs. As the family adapts, responsibilities and relationships undergo transformation, and it may take several





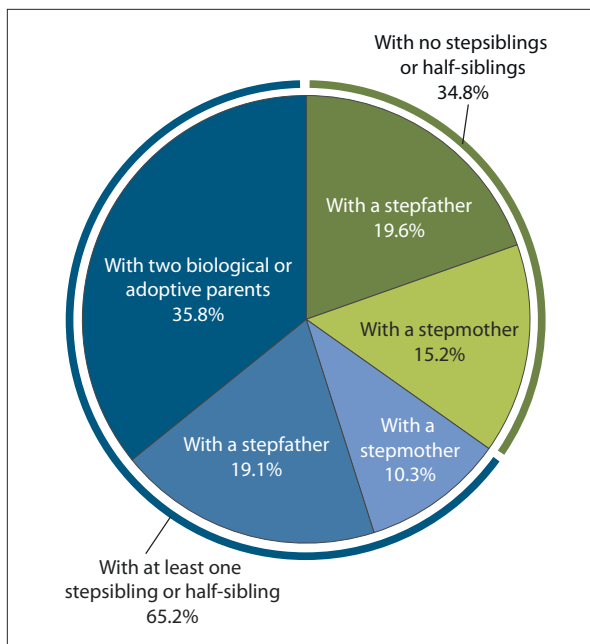
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years for the stepfamily to identify as a unified family.

In the past, stepparents were often depicted negatively in popular culture and folklore, portraying them as wicked figures who mistreated their stepchildren. The image of the stepparent has undergone a

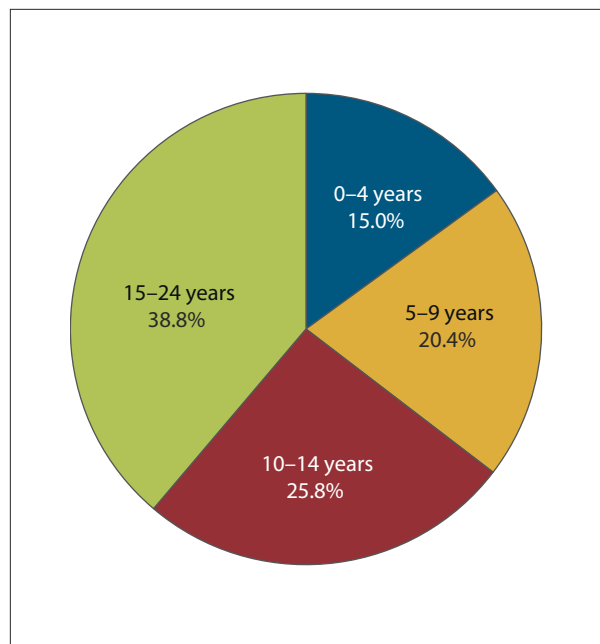
significant transformation over the years, evolving from a negative stereotype to being recognized as a valued second parent. Despite this shift, policy makers and courts are still grappling with the complexities that stepfamilies present, especially around the rights and responsibilities of stepparents.

**Living arrangements of children under 15 living in stepfamilies, Canada, 2021**



Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Home alone: More persons living solo than ever before, but roomies the fastest growing household type. *The Daily*.<sup>38</sup>

**Distribution of children under 15 living in stepfamilies, by age group, Canada, 2021**



Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Home alone: More persons living solo than ever before, but roomies the fastest growing household type. *The Daily*.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>a</sup> In this context, adoptive children are treated the same as biological children.



# 10 Fertility rates hit a record low (again)

Women in Canada now have fewer children on average than in past generations. This shift can be seen in the decline in the total fertility rate (average number of children per woman) over the past half-century. After reaching an all-time high of 3.94 children per woman in 1959<sup>50</sup> during the peak of the baby boom, the total fertility rate (TFR) declined sharply until the late 1980s.<sup>51</sup> It then fluctuated over the next 20 years until starting another long-term decline in 2009 that continues to this day (except for a small temporary increase in 2021). The most recent data show a new record low was reached in 2022 at 1.33 children per woman.

The reasons for this long-term decline are complex. They include the growing participation of women in higher education and in the paid labour force, increased effectiveness and availability of contraception, and the decreased influence of religion on daily life.<sup>50</sup> The percentage of women aged 25 to 54 with a postsecondary certificate/diploma more than doubled from 28.3% in 1990<sup>52</sup> to 74.5% in 2021.<sup>53</sup> During the same period, the labour force participation rate of women aged 25 to 54 increased from 75.5% to 84.2%.<sup>54</sup>

People's decisions about childbearing can be affected by the uncertainty resulting from major events or changes in broader social, political, environmental, or health circumstances. For example, survey data from April to June 2021 showed that 23.5% of the population aged 15 to 49 changed their fertility plans because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>55</sup> Nearly one in five (19.2%) said they now wanted to have fewer children than previously planned, or to have a baby later than previously planned.

Declining fertility rates also coincide with changing patterns in the age of mothers.<sup>50</sup> The average age of first-time mothers increased from 26.2 years in 1994 to a record high of 29.4 years in 2019.<sup>56</sup> While age at first birth declined for all age groups under 30, it increased for those aged 30 and older.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, fertility among young women aged 15 to 19 dropped from 25.1 per 1,000 live births in 1994 to 4.4 per 1,000 live births by 2022.<sup>51</sup>

Fertility rates vary across the country. Since it was created in 1999, Nunavut had had the highest total fertility rate in Canada (2.23 children per woman in 2022), followed by Saskatchewan (1.69), Northwest Territories, and Quebec (1.49 each).<sup>51</sup>





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The lowest fertility rates in 2022 were in British Columbia (1.11) and Nova Scotia (1.18).

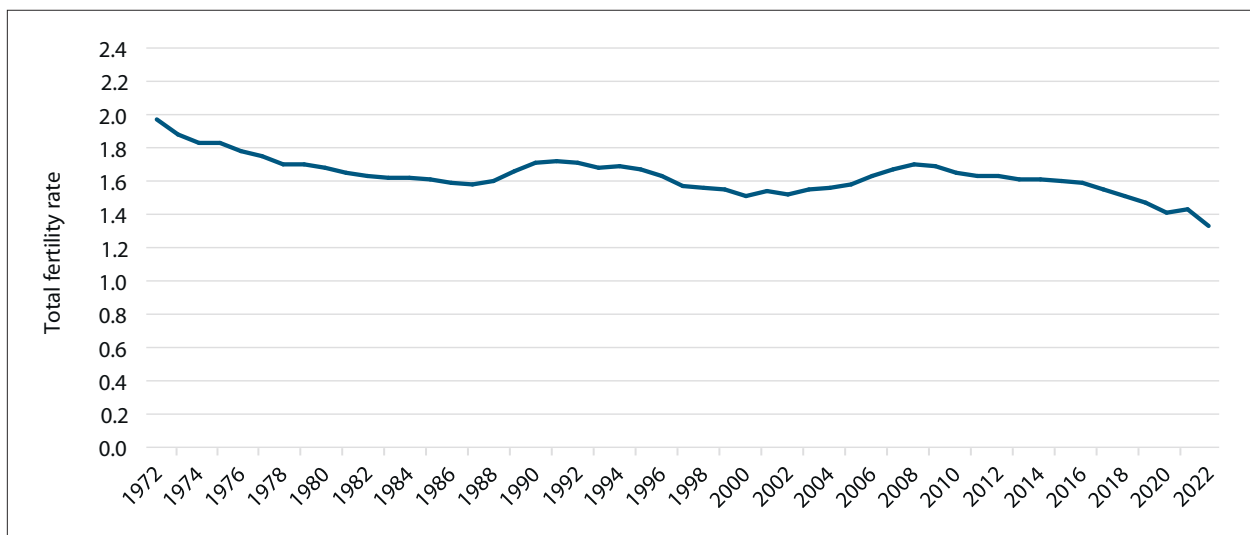
## Why this matters

Policymakers and researchers closely monitor fertility rates because major shifts can affect families, the labour market, and the economy. For families, fewer children mean there are fewer people to provide care and support within and across generations. It also means that intergenerational transfers of wealth (e.g., inheritances, family support for

major life expenses, etc.) could be increasingly concentrated in fewer hands in the coming years.

Smaller numbers of babies being born will result in fewer workers entering the labour market in the future. Therefore, the labour market could become increasingly reliant on immigration to maintain a balance of older and younger workers. Tracking fertility rates can inform long-term policy and program development, such as immigration targets, family allowances, subsidized childcare, pension plans, and compassionate care benefits.

**Average number of children per woman (total fertility rate), Canada, 1972–2022**



Sources: Statistics Canada. (2018, May 17). Fertility: Fewer children, older moms. *Canadian Megatrends*.<sup>50</sup>

Statistics Canada. (2023, September 27). Crude birth rate, age-specific fertility rates and total fertility rate (live births).<sup>51</sup>



# 11 Fathers represent a growing share of parents in one-parent families

One-parent families are more common than they were 30 years ago, but their growth has stabilized over the last decade. Also known as lone-parent, single-parent, and solo-parent families, their prevalence has fluctuated throughout Canada's history due to shifting social, economic, and cultural factors.

In 2021, one-parent families represented 16.4% of census families.<sup>6</sup> This is up from 1991 (13.0%), although the proportion has been stable since 2011 (16.3%).<sup>57</sup> In 2001, part of the increase was the result of a change in the definition of the census family used for that census questionnaire (and all since).<sup>58</sup>

The highest proportion of one-parent families in 2021 was in Nunavut (33.1%) and the Northwest Territories (23.4%), while the lowest was in British Columbia (14.9%).<sup>48</sup> That year, nearly one in five children under 15 across Canada (19%) lived in a one-parent family.<sup>38</sup>

Most parents in one-parent families are women (77.2% in 2021).<sup>48</sup> Even so, the proportion that are fathers has increased

in recent decades, from 17.3% in 1991<sup>59</sup> to 22.8% in 2021.<sup>48</sup> This is similar across the country, except in Quebec (26.0%) and in the territories, where the proportion of fathers in one-parent families was 30.4% in Nunavut and 26.8% in Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

One-parent families are not new, but their circumstances have changed over time. In the early 20th century, the most common pathway to becoming a one-parent family was through the death of a parent. As mortality rates declined across generations, so did the prevalence of one-parent families.<sup>57</sup>

The creation of the *Divorce Act, 1968*, along with amendments to the Act in 1986, made it easier to divorce. Both contributed to spikes in the growth rate of one-parent families. Before these reforms—and when marriage rates peaked immediately following Canada's baby boom—one-parent families represented a record-low 8.2% of census families in 1966.<sup>57</sup>

Women's increasing labour force participation also strengthened mothers' abilities to raise children on their own.



## Why this matters

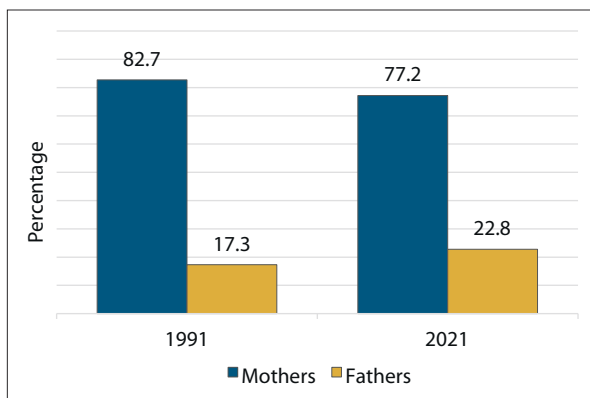
One-parent families have always been a part of Canada’s family landscape, as families transition out of being couple families following divorce or the death of a partner. Sometimes they result from a conscious choice to raise a child or children without another parent, although there is no Canadian data on this topic.

Poverty is a notable concern for one-parent families. They often face economic challenges due to only having one earner, along with the financial responsibilities of raising children. Many face difficulties accessing affordable housing and childcare.<sup>60</sup> One-parent families with children aged 5 and

under are approximately five times more likely than couples with children of the same age to experience poverty.<sup>61</sup>

To lessen financial hardship among one-parent families, federal and provincial governments have implemented social support programs such as income assistance, childcare subsidies, and tax benefits. Following this, poverty rates for individuals living in one-parent families led by a woman with a child aged five and under decreased from 62.7% in 2015 to 31.3% in 2020.<sup>61</sup> Still, even in 2020, the poverty rate for parents in one-parent families with young children was much higher than for couple families.

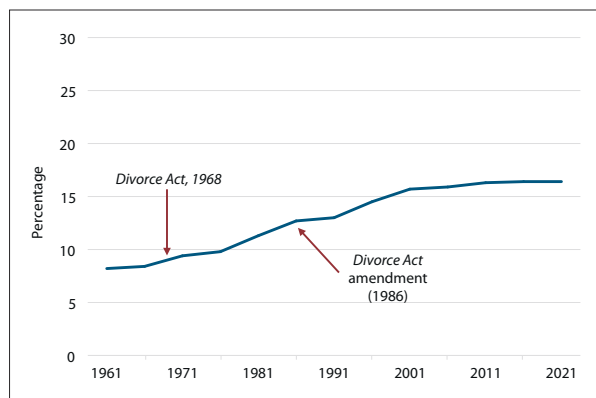
**One-parent families led by mothers and fathers, Canada, 1991 and 2021**



Sources: Statistics Canada. (1996). Census families in private households by age groups of youngest never-married child at home (10), showing family structure (7), for Canada, provinces, territories and census metropolitan areas, 1991 and 1996 censuses (20% sample data).<sup>59</sup>

Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Census family structure including detailed information on stepfamilies, number of children, average number of children and age of youngest child: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations.<sup>48</sup>

**Percentage of all census families that were one-parent families, Canada, 1961-2021**



Source: Statistics Canada. (2012, September). Fifty years of families in Canada: 1961 to 2011. *2011 Analytical products*.<sup>57</sup>

Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Census family structure including detailed information on stepfamilies, number of children, average number of children and age of youngest child: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations.<sup>48</sup>



# 12 Thousands of children are adopted every year but far more need homes

According to the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada, approximately 2,000 children under the care of child welfare agencies in Canada find a new home with an adoptive family every year.<sup>62</sup> Adopted children often gain new siblings, with data from the 2011 General Social Survey (the most recently available data on the topic) showing that the majority (59%) of adoptive parents also had at least one biological child.<sup>63</sup>

Legally, adoption ends the responsibilities of birth parents toward their child and replaces them with new legal bonds connecting the child to the adoptive parents. Adoptions can occur whether the birth parents and adoptive parents live in the same province or territory, across different provinces or territories, or between Canada and another country through an international adoption.

There are three main pathways to adopt a child that was born in Canada. The first option is through the public child welfare system, which finds homes for children who are in permanent government care. This is available in all provinces and territories and is publicly funded. Children undergoing this process often come from foster care.

Alternatively, some children are adopted through private adoption agencies, which connect the birth parent(s) with people who wish to adopt. Currently only available in British Columbia,<sup>64</sup> Alberta,<sup>65</sup> Manitoba,<sup>66</sup> and Ontario,<sup>67</sup> private adoptions are not publicly funded and typically cost several thousands of dollars. Lastly, in New Brunswick,<sup>68</sup> biological parents can actively participate in finding an adoptive family for their child.

The adoption pathway is different in Indigenous communities, where "custom adoptions" are frequent. Custom adoption is the cultural practice by which birth parents and adoptive parents make arrangements directly with each other, without involving an adoption agency. By its nature, customary adoption varies from one community to another, but it is common for biological parents to maintain a role in the child's life after adoption.<sup>68</sup>

A detailed national portrait of adoption in Canada is difficult because child welfare works differently across provinces and territories. The same is true for international adoptions, with adoption criteria varying from one province or territory to another.<sup>69</sup>



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Currently, only Quebec maintains centralized data on both provincial and international adoptions in the province.<sup>a</sup> One reason for this distinction is that since 2006, Quebec has provided adoption-specific benefits through the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP). Until 2024, these particular benefits for adoptive parents were not available in other provinces and territories.

## Why this matters

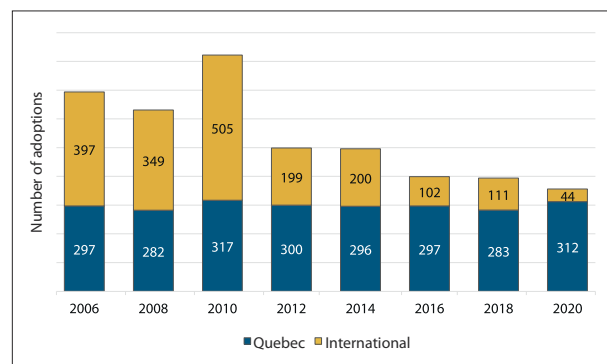
Adoptive families in Canada play an important role in helping children in need with stable, caring environments. While this makes a major difference to the lives of the 2,000 children who find new homes every year, they represent fewer than one in 10 of the 30,000 children who are eligible for permanent adoption.<sup>62</sup> But this is only the tip of the iceberg, as more than 63,000 children overall are in government care, and an estimated 235,000 children and youth across the country are considered at risk of entering care due to unstable family situations.

The needs of adoptive families and the adopted children are likely to vary depending on whether the adoption process involves family members or an agency, or is international. Since 2010, the number of international adoptions in Quebec has declined, hitting a historical low in 2020 due to the border closures in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast, the number of adoptions within Quebec has remained relatively stable since 2006.<sup>70</sup>

In Quebec, biological and adoptive parents are eligible for the same number of weeks of parental benefits. Outside Quebec, until 2024, the federal benefits system provided longer paid leave for biological parents than for adoptive parents. This inequality was due to the fact that maternity benefits were intended only for the birthing parent to support their recovery from pregnancy and childbirth. This disparity in benefits put adoptive families at a disadvantage. Some adopted children may have experienced a difficult situation prior to adoption, which can affect the time needed to bond with their adoptive parents and/or the need to access additional resources to meet special physical, developmental, and emotional needs.<sup>71</sup>

**Number of adoptions resulting in QPIP benefits, by adoption type, Quebec, 2006-2020**



Source: Conseil de gestion de l'assurance parentale. (2022, October). *Profil des prestataires 2020*.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The data are only for adoptive parents who have claimed adoption benefits and are likely to underestimate the number of adopted children.



# 13 Half of children in foster care are Indigenous

Out-of-home care (i.e., fostering) provides children in difficult situations with temporary support when they are not able to remain in their family home. This includes children who have experienced neglect, abuse, or trouble with the law.

Depending on the circumstances, time spent in foster care may range from a brief period to a more extended arrangement. Foster families receive compensation for caring for the child, but they are not considered to be the child's legal guardians. Child welfare is a provincial responsibility. There is no centralized system tracking the number of children in foster care across jurisdictions, where definitions, reporting methods, and inclusion criteria often vary.

The 2021 Census counted 26,680 foster children under age 15 in Canada.<sup>72</sup> This represents about one in 250 children under 15. Still, the census does not provide a complete picture of children in out-of-home care. It does not collect information on children in other placement situations, such as group care, treatment care, or adoption services.

In 2021, Indigenous children accounted for 7.7% of children under 15 but for more than half (53.8%) of all foster children.<sup>73</sup> Among

all children in Canada under 15, Indigenous children were about 14 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in foster care (3.2% and 0.2%, respectively).<sup>74</sup>

Foster children are most common in provinces and territories with relatively large proportions Indigenous populations. For example, Manitoba had the highest rate of children under 15 in foster care at a rate of 19.7 per 1,000 children and PEI had the lowest (1.7 per 1,000 children).<sup>75</sup> While there is less data available on racialized children, Black children are also overrepresented among children admitted into care, which is 2.2 times higher than their proportion among all children.<sup>76</sup>

### Why this matters

The high rate of Indigenous children in foster care in many ways mirrors the practices and outcomes of the "Sixties Scoop."<sup>77</sup> This refers to a period when the Canadian government was removing many Indigenous children from their families and communities without notice or consent under the guise of "child welfare." These children were then placed with mostly White, middle-class families, typically devoid of cultural understanding around differing child rearing practices—



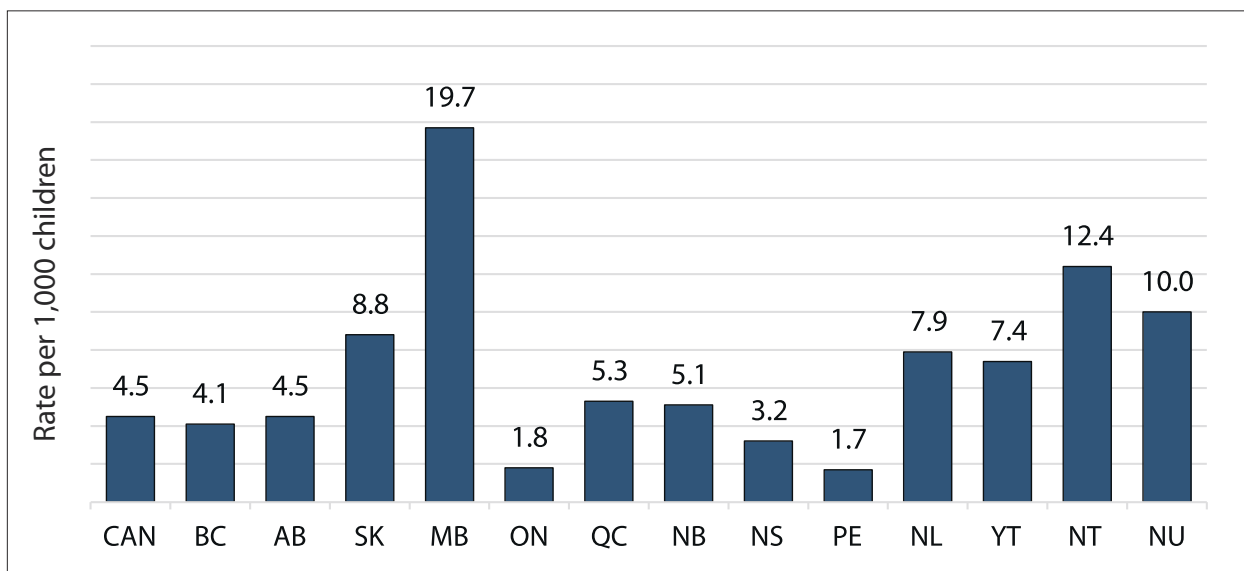
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an extension of racist policies that sought to assimilate Indigenous people.<sup>76</sup>

The practice of removing Indigenous children from their families continues at high rates today, which has led many to call modern child welfare practices the “Millennium Scoop.” Similar to the residential school system, this practice uproots children from their families and communities, and away from loving child-rearing practices, parental role models, their cultures, and their identities.

Some steps have been taken to reduce the number of Indigenous children and youth in care. Developed in consultation with Indigenous peoples, the 2019 *Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*<sup>73</sup> affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services. It also allows Indigenous groups, who wish to do so, to design and deliver child and family services solutions that best suit their needs.

Rate of children under 15 in foster care, Canada, provinces and territories, 2021



Source: Black, T., Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., & Houston, E. (2022). Children in foster care in Canada in 2016 & 2021.<sup>75</sup>





# 14 The percentage of older adults who are widowed has declined

When the first edition of *Families Count* was published in 1994, the most recent census data showed that one-third (33.0%) of the population in Canada aged 65 and older were widowed in 1991.<sup>7</sup> By 2021, this had fallen to one in five (20.0%).<sup>1</sup> Across all age groups, there are proportionally fewer people who are widowed today than in the early 1990s.

A variety of factors have driven the decline in the proportion of widowed people and for the tendency for widowhood to occur later in life. Improved healthcare and advances in medical science have contributed to increased life expectancy. Declining crude mortality rates over the last half century (i.e., the number of deaths in a given year per 100,000 population) have also reduced the likelihood of a spouse dying at a younger age.<sup>78</sup>

The declining likelihood of becoming widowed over the last 30 years has been most evident among older women. This is the result of the closing gender gap in life expectancy over the last several decades. Between 1980–1982 and 2020–2022, life expectancy at birth increased from 79.1 years to 83.8 years for women, and from 72.0 years to 79.3 years among men.<sup>79</sup> As a result, the gap in life expectancy between women and men fell from 7.1 years to 4.5 years during this period.

In 2021, 47.1% of women aged 80 to 84 were widowed, compared with 16.6% of men in the same age group.<sup>1</sup> It is not until men reach 95 years of age and older that most are widowed. Also, men tend to be older than women in most heterosexual marriages, and the average age difference between spouses or partners has reduced in recent decades.<sup>80</sup> This has contributed to the declining percentage of widowed people—particularly women.

Another contributing factor is declining marriage rates. “Widowed” includes people whose legally married spouse has died and who have not remarried. Common-law families are therefore not included in widowhood statistics, because the partners were never legally married.

### Why this matters

In addition to feelings of grief, sadness, and loneliness, being widowed can have major consequences for the grieving partners and their families. Widowhood has economic implications, since it is often accompanied by additional expenses, such as funeral costs and expenses related to changes in living arrangements. Losing a spouse also often means losing a source



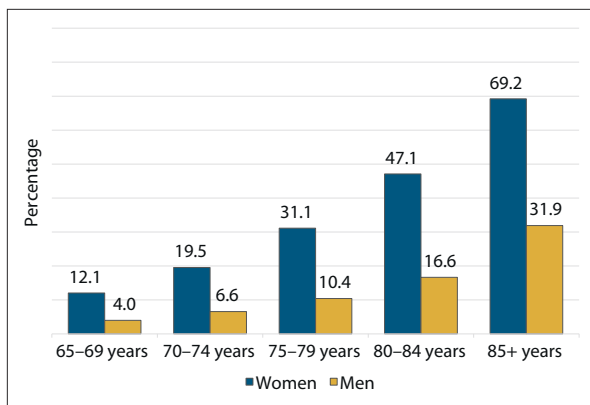


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of family income, particularly for older people who may have limited workforce opportunities and/or who had relied on their spouses' income or pension benefits. For younger families, the surviving spouse may experience difficulties in combining earning and caregiving responsibilities while adjusting to changing family dynamics during a difficult time.

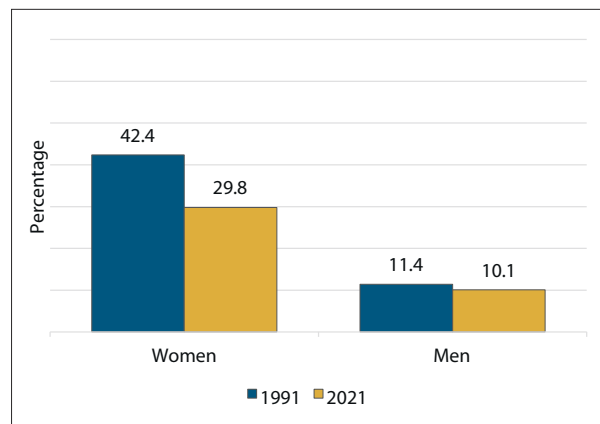
Various programs and initiatives are in place to support the economic wellbeing of widowed people, including survivor benefits through the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and Old Age Security (OAS) programs. These programs have helped to improve the living standard of widowed older adults. Research has shown that divorce has a greater impact on living standards than widowhood during retirement.<sup>81</sup>

**Percentage of older adults who were widowed, by gender and age group, Canada, 2021**



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

**Percentage of the population aged 65 and older who were widowed, by gender, 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.<sup>7</sup>

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



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- 2 Statistics Canada. (1993, June 1). Table 97-570-X1991003 Population by age groups (21a) and sex (3), showing marital status (6) - Canada, provinces and territories, census divisions and census subdivisions. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/97-570-X1991003>
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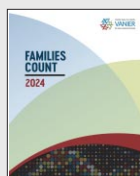
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