

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.¹ This is up from 1991 (13.0%), although the proportion has been stable since 2011 (16.3%).² 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).³

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%).⁴ That year, nearly one in five children under 15 across Canada (19%) lived in a one-parent family.⁵

Most parents in one-parent families are women (77.2% in 2021).⁴ Even so, the proportion that are fathers has increased

in recent decades, from 17.3% in 1991⁶ to 22.8% in 2021.⁴ 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.²

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 1966.²

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



Why this matters

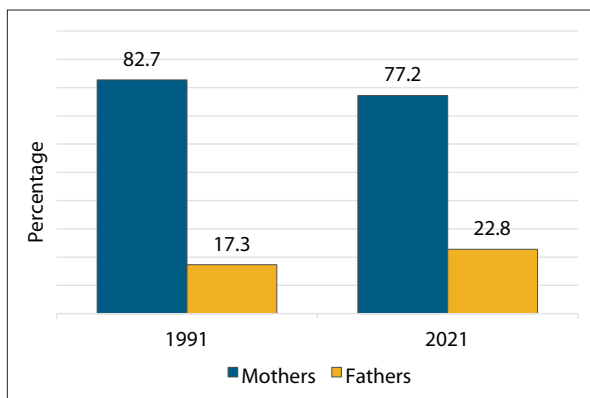
One-parent families have always been a part of Canada’s family landscape, as families transition out of being couple families following divorce or the death of a partner. Sometimes they result from a conscious choice to raise a child or children without another parent, although there is no Canadian data 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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 2020.⁸ Still, even in 2020, the poverty rate for parents in one-parent families with young children was much higher than for couple families.

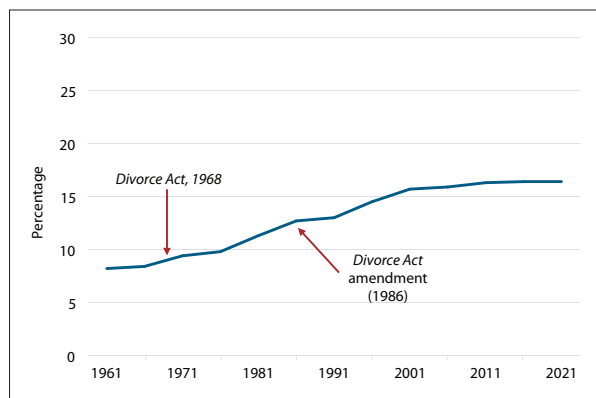
One-parent families led by mothers and fathers, Canada, 1991 and 2021



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).⁶

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.⁴

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*.²

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.⁴



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References

- ¹ Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Table 98-10-0123-01 Census family structure, presence of children and average number of persons per census family: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations. <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810012301-eng>
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- ³ Statistics Canada. (2012). Families reference guide, 2011 Census. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/ref/guides/98-312-x/98-312-x2011005-eng.cfm>
- ⁴ Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Table 98-10-0124-01 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. <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810012401-eng>
- ⁵ Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Home alone: More persons living solo than ever before, but roomies the fastest growing household type. *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220713/dq220713a-eng.htm?indid=32985-4&indgeo=0>
- ⁶ 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). <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/English/census96/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=1035&PRID=0&PTYPE=89103&S=0&SHOWALL=No&SUB=0&Temporal=2006&THEME=24&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF>
- ⁷ Findlay, L. C., Wei, L., & Arim, R. (2021, August 25). Patterns of participation in early learning and child care among families with potential socioeconomic disadvantages in Canada. *Economic and Social Reports*. <https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202100800002-eng>
- ⁸ Statistics Canada. (2022, November 9). Disaggregated trends in poverty from the 2021 Census of Population. *Analytical products, 2021 Census*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-X/2021009/98-200-X2021009-eng.cfm>



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