

Understanding Multiple-Partner Fertility in Canada¹

■ Nathan Battams and Gaby Novoa

Having children with more than one partner (multiple-partner fertility, or MPF) is an old phenomenon but one with growing relevance for understanding families in Canada, where this “family pathway” has become increasingly common. However, there is little research on the topic in the Canadian context, in part due to methodological challenges in measuring these complex and evolving family trajectories.

Research and data on MPF are important to understanding family well-being in Canada, as studies have found that childbearing across partnerships is associated with higher rates of relationship dissolution² and that children can experience negative outcomes resulting from family roles and responsibilities being shared across multiple households.^{3, 4} In a large and diverse country like Canada, an evidence-based understanding of *regional variations* in MPF is of particular value to the design and implementation of policies aimed at addressing the inequalities that people in MPF family environments are more likely to experience.

Ana Fostik and Céline Le Bourdais’s study “Regional Variations in Multiple-Partner Fertility in Canada”⁵ addresses this knowledge gap and examines how *context* shapes family aspirations and trajectories across the country. Using data from the 2011 General Social Survey on Family, they explore the prevalence of MPF and differences across regions, and whether there are regional differences in the type of family trajectories associated with MPF.

Patterns of family formation and fertility across regions

Identifying and measuring MPF is complex, as it involves a variety of processes – coupling, uncoupling and recoupling, as well as childbearing within and outside unions – that intersect, interact and follow differing patterns across Canada. The research also necessitates situating childbearing within and outside of the relationships people experience over the course of their lives.⁶ To date, estimates on its prevalence have varied



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according to the source, the type of data used, and which sub-populations are targeted.

While it is known that MPF has increased over the years in Canada, what *hasn't* been studied is how its prevalence and characteristics vary across regions. This is of particular relevance in Canada, where welfare regimes and family policies (e.g. parental leave and child care) that can influence family behaviour differ across provinces and territories, and key socio-cultural differences related to conjugal and family life differentiate Quebec from other regions in Canada.



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Fostik and Le Bourdais provide an overview of some of the contextual elements that may shape MPF experiences. They first review previous findings on fertility rates across regions, including among women aged 15 to 19, as studies have found evidence that the likelihood of experiencing MPF is linked to age at first birth.^{7, 8}

- *Nationally*, the total fertility rate was 1.49 children per woman in 2017.⁹
- *Regionally*, in 2011, fertility was the highest in the Prairies, with rates varying between 1.81 in Alberta to 1.99 in Saskatchewan, while it was lowest in British Columbia (1.42).¹⁰
- In 2011, the share of births to mothers aged 15 to 19 was nearly twice as high in the Atlantic region and the Prairies (5% and 4.6%, respectively) as in the three largest provinces (Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia, ranging from 2.1% to 2.6%).¹¹

Studies from other countries have found a close association between the context of the relationship (conjugal status) in which the first birth takes place and MPF, with births among cohabiting couples or otherwise outside of marriage being associated with a higher likelihood of MPF.^{12, 13, 14} In their review of differences in partnership behaviour across Canadian regions, Fostik and Le Bourdais find that:

- Estimates (2008 data – most recent available) show that nearly 50% of marriages end in divorce in Quebec and Alberta, compared with 30% or less in the Atlantic provinces, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.¹⁵
- While marriage rates have declined and cohabiting unions have increased over the years, this shift has occurred at a different pace across Canada. The largest change is in Quebec, where it is estimated that less than 30% of people expect to marry at least once in their life (lowest in the country).¹⁶
- In Quebec, the percentage of cohabiting unions and the proportion of children born to cohabiting parents or lone mothers is more than twice that of other regions in Canada.

Cohabiting unions in Quebec also tend to last longer than in other regions.^{17, 18, 19}

- In 2011, the percentage of couples cohabiting ranged between 12% in Ontario and 17% in the Atlantic provinces, compared with 38% in Quebec. Since 2006, more than 60% of births in Quebec occurred outside of marriage (mostly to cohabiting parents).^{20, 21}

Fostik and Le Bourdais set out to explore whether a) the prevalence of MPF follows a similar distribution pattern across regions, b) the higher rates of teen childbearing seen in the Atlantic provinces and the Prairies are likely to result in higher levels of MPF and c) the higher level of marriage instability and the larger proportion of cohabiting couples in Quebec are likely to result in higher levels of MPF in this region.

KEY FINDING 1: Significant variation in MPF across regions for mothers – minimal for fathers

Overall, the authors find that MPF is a “relatively uncommon” family trajectory in Canada, with rates that align with those seen in other countries. In 2011, 7.5% of women and 5.3% of men aged 25 to 64 had children with more than one partner, with higher rates among mothers (13.1%) and fathers (10.6%) of at least two children.

While Fostik and Le Bourdais found minimal regional differences for MPF among fathers, their findings reveal significant variations for mothers. Among mothers of at least two children, 17.4% in both the Atlantic provinces and in the Prairies had those children with more than one partner, compared with 10.2% in Ontario and 12.1% in Quebec.

The study also found that the *timing* and *intensity* of MPF varies between regions. Among women in the Prairies and Atlantic provinces, the authors found that the likelihood of experiencing MPF increases more rapidly in the years following the first birth: 3 years after giving birth to their first child, 2.5% of women had a child with a new partner and between 5% to 6% did so by the fifth year. These are nearly double the rates in Ontario and Quebec.

Overall (women and men combined), MPF intensity is highest in the Prairies, where 11.8% of mothers and 10.2% of fathers experienced MPF within 15 years of the birth of their first child, though the rate in Atlantic provinces was 12.5% for mothers (and 8.1% of fathers, resulting in a lower overall rate).

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KEY FINDING 2: Atlantic and Prairie regions have both higher teenage birth rates and MPF

As mentioned earlier, births to women aged 15 to 19 occurred at nearly twice the rate in the Atlantic and Prairie regions as in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia. In their analysis, Fostik and Le Bourdais found that mothers who had their first birth in this age group were approximately 1.4 times more likely to go on to have another child with a different partner, relative to those who had their first child between ages 20 and 24. Past this age range of first-time births, the likelihood of women experiencing MPF drops even further, by 40% for women and 50% for men.

KEY FINDING 3: Higher rates of cohabitation and marital instability haven't led to higher MPF in Quebec

In Quebec, which has higher levels of marriage instability and a larger proportion of cohabiting couples, Fostik and Le Bourdais find the lowest overall average prevalence of MPF (at 6.7% of women and only 3.9% of men) and the second-lowest overall prevalence among those with two or more children at 12.1% of women and 8.4% of men (averaging only slightly below Ontario).

Regarding the timing of MPF, they find that MPF intensity is lowest in the Quebec and Ontario provinces, where 8.1% of

mothers and only 5% of fathers in Quebec and 6.9% of mothers and 6.7% of fathers experienced MPF within 15 years of the birth of their first child.

Conclusion

Fostik and Le Bourdais's study contributes to our understanding of family trajectories and modern family experiences in Canada by addressing the knowledge gap on multiple-partner fertility across regions. Aligning with findings from other countries, they conclude that MPF "appears closely linked" to the conditions surrounding the birth of the first child, such as conjugal status and age at birth. As these contexts vary across regions, this study's regional focus provides valuable insights on family behaviour and evidence for policies and programs aimed at addressing social and economic equality.

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Access the article "Regional Variations in Multiple-Partner Fertility in Canada" by Ana Fostik and Céline Le Bourdais

This research recap was reviewed by Ana Fostik, PhD.

¹ Research recap of article by Ana Fostik and Céline Le Bourdais, "Regional Variations in Multiple-Partner Fertility in Canada," *Canadian Studies in Population* 47(1-2) (March 16, 2020). [Link: https://bit.ly/39u1uv3](https://bit.ly/39u1uv3).

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