

Time alone

by Warren Clark

Portable phones, pagers and data transmission devices of every sort keep us terminally in touch wherever we are. At the same time, many people frequently feel lonely. Loneliness has been linked to depression, anxiety, interpersonal hostility and an increased vulnerability to health problems.¹ Surveys asking what's most important in life routinely find relationships at the top of the list. Connections with other people sustain us, enrich us, and allow us to know who we are. Studies show they can make us healthier, happier and more successful at our jobs.² They make life worth living. Yet, many people live alone and spend much of their time alone.

Using data from the Census of Population, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the General Social Survey (GSS), this article examines the groups of Canadians most likely to live alone, the amount of time spent alone on an average day, attitudes to spending time alone and the influence that time alone has on overall happiness.

1. Rokach, A. 2000. "Perceived causes of loneliness in adulthood." *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 15, 1: 67-84.
2. Pappano, L. 2001. *The Connection Gap — Why Americans Feel So Alone*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. p. 130.



CST What you should know about this study

Data on time spent alone come from the 1986, 1992 and 1998 General Social Surveys (GSS) on the time use of Canadians. Respondents were asked to indicate who was with them during each activity on the reference day. Those who said they were alone were recorded as spending time alone for the duration of that activity.

The 1986 GSS interviewed people between November 22 and December 22, whereas the 1998 survey was conducted throughout the year. However, selected interviews for 1998 show little difference in the time people spent alone during the pre-Christmas period and the rest of the year (6.0 hours versus 5.9 hours). This suggests that seasonality is not an important source of variation in time spent alone and that the increase between 1986 and 1998 is real.

Data on living alone are taken from the Census of Population and the 2001 Labour Force Survey. The concept of living alone refers to being the sole occupant of a private dwelling. Persons living alone are therefore not necessarily alone in the sense of being socially isolated. Excluded are those who live in collective dwellings such as hotels, hospitals, residences, institutions, camps, jails and rooming houses, representing about 1.6% of the population in 1996.

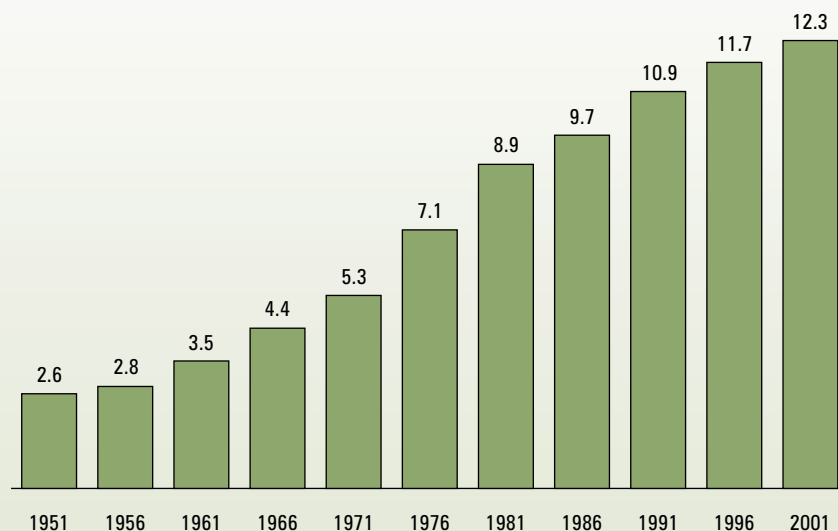
Living alone has soared over the past 50 years

Although we want to be connected to those around us, our lives seem to be headed in the opposite direction. Over the last 50 years, living alone has become much more common: the proportion of Canadians aged 15 and over who lived alone nearly quintupled from 2.6% in 1951 to 12.3% in 2001.³

Many reasons may account for the rise in this living arrangement. The decline of extended families has seen more unattached grandparents, aunts and uncles — who previously would have stayed with relatives — living on their own, while falling fertility rates and fewer children living close by have left many widowed seniors alone.⁴ Other equally important factors include the Canada and Quebec Pension Plans of 1966, which reduced economic hardship among seniors; health care programs that increasingly provide care in people's homes; and household conveniences, including microwaves, dishwashers, frost-free refrigerators, freezers and boxed meals, which all make living alone easier to accomplish.⁵ As for the

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% of population aged 15 and over living alone



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 1951–1996, and Labour Force Survey, 2001.

3. About 12% of Great Britain's population lived alone in 2001 and 10% of the United States' in 2000. Matheson, J. and P. Babb (ed.). 2002. *Social Trends* 32. London, England: National Statistics. p. 41; and U.S. Census Bureau. 2002. *Quick Tables*. <http://factfinder.census.gov>, DP-1 Profile of General Demographic Characteristics — 2000; Data set; Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF 1): 100-Percent Data; Geographic Area: United States (Accessed on 15 February 2002.)

4. Macunovich, D.J., R.A. Eaterlin, C.M. Schaeffer and E.M. Crimmins. February 1995. "Echoes of the baby boom and bust: Recent and prospective changes in living alone among elderly widows in the United States." *Demography* 32, 1: 18.

5. Miron, J.R. 1980. *The Rise of the One-Person Household: The Ontario Experience, 1951 to 1976*. University of Toronto, Centre for Urban and Community Studies. Research paper no. 116, p. 1-2.

young, changing societal circumstances such as delayed marriage, high divorce rates and greater economic independence for women have made the option of staying alone more likely.⁶

Not only are more Canadians living alone, but they do so at a younger age. According to the 1995 GSS, adults who in 1995 were between the ages of 25 and 34 were much more likely to have lived alone at ages 15 to 24 than their senior (ages 65 and over) counterparts: 36% versus 6%. Nearly one-quarter of seniors (23%) reported first being on their own at age 55 or older, probably due to widowhood in many cases, and almost half (47%) had never lived alone. While coping with the loss of a spouse is stressful at any age, learning to live alone later in life, when change is more difficult to adapt to, can be even more trying.

Smaller households, larger homes

Many homes today are designed to provide people with spaces where they may do many things simultaneously. In the kitchen/family room, one person may be preparing a meal and speaking on the phone, while another watches TV and exercises, or checks e-mail while snacking, doing homework and listening to music on headphones. The old living room, with its essentially single purpose of sitting and talking has, in effect, been replaced with a room that encourages household members not to gather around the fire on a winter evening but to be privately engaged in separate tasks.⁷

Homes with more places to be alone and uninterrupted by other

family members are often in great demand. Between 1951 and 1996, while the size of the average household shrunk from 4.0 to 2.6 people, the size

of homes increased from 5.3 to 6.1 rooms. As a result, even individuals who live with others spend more time by themselves. Not too many years

Age	Both sexes	Both sexes	Men	Women
	'000	% of population living alone in private households		
15 and over	3,030	12	12	13
15-24	140	3	4	3
25-44	980	10	14	7
45-54	450	10	11	9
55-64	400	14	11	16
65 and over	1,060	29	17	38

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, 2001.

Age	1986	1992	1998	Change between 1986 and 1998
	Number of hours spent alone on an average day			Hours
Both sexes				
15 and over	4.4	5.3	5.9	1.5
15-24	3.6	4.4	4.7	1.1
25-44	3.9	4.7	5.5	1.6
45-64	4.8	6.0	6.5	1.7
65-74	5.8	6.9	6.9	1.1
75 and over	6.8	7.8	8.0	1.2
Men				
15 and over	4.1	5.4	6.0	1.9
15-24	3.9	4.7	4.9	1.0
25-44	3.9	4.9	5.8	1.9
45-64	4.3	6.0	6.6	2.3
65 and over	5.1	6.5	6.5	1.4
Women				
15 and over	4.6	5.3	5.8	1.2
15-24	3.3	4.1	4.4	1.1
25-44	4.0	4.5	5.1	1.1
45-64	5.3	6.0	6.4	1.1
65 and over	6.9	7.6	8.0	1.1

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.

6. Teachman, J.D., L.M. Tedrow and K. Crowder. November 2000. "The changing demography of America's families." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62: 1243.

7. Pappano, L. 2001. op.cit. p. 109-110.

ago, for example, a small space tucked between bedrooms was the only bathroom for a household. Today, even the most modest new homes have two and sometimes three washrooms to preserve the privacy of fewer household members. Bedrooms, which in the past were often shared by siblings, are now often occupied by one child only, ensuring further privacy.

Independent living rises most among the oldest

When picturing people living alone, widows and widowers often come to mind. In 2001, they were the largest group of people living on their own — about one million seniors, mostly widows. The rise in living alone reflects in part the aging of the population, as more people find themselves on their own after the death of a partner. At the same time, with the introduction of the Canada Pension Plan in 1966, fewer widowed people suffer economic hardship, facilitating an independent life.

In 1971, 39% of widowed people aged 65 and over lived alone; by 2001, this figure had increased to 72%.⁸ Although widowed men and women of all ages are more likely to live alone than in the past, independent living increased the most among those over age 85.

However, seniors are not the only Canadians to report growing rates of living on their own. Individuals aged 25 to 44 are also increasingly more likely to experience this living arrangement (just under one million of them in 2001), with men this age nearly twice as likely as women to do so: 14% versus 7%, respectively.

Canadians spend nearly six hours a day alone

According to the GSS, on an average day in 1998, Canadians aged 15 and over spent 5.9 hours alone compared with 4.4 hours in 1986 (excluding personal care activities such as sleep and



Young working adults and parents aged 25 to 44 with children spend the least time alone

Age	Both sexes	Men	Women
	Number of hours spent alone on an average day		
15 and over	5.9	6.0	5.8
15–24			
Students	4.9	5.0	4.9
Employed	4.3	4.4	4.2
25–44			
Single	7.0	7.6	5.9
Married/common-law, no children	5.5	5.5	5.5
Married/common-law, children	4.8	5.0	4.6
45–64			
Single	9.0	9.6	8.2
Married/common-law, no children	6.0	6.1	5.9
Married/common-law, children	5.9	6.0	5.7
65 and over			
Married	5.2	5.3	5.1
Widowed	10.3	10.5	10.2

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

personal hygiene). Time spent alone grew in nearly every group, but particularly among men aged 45 to 64, who reported an increase of over 2 hours between 1986 and 1998.⁹ In contrast, women's time on their own climbed by approximately 1.2 hours, regardless of age.

Interestingly, people spent more time alone during both paid and unpaid work as well as leisure activities. The advent of personal entertainment devices and home computers likely contributed to more leisure time alone. Despite households getting smaller, the number of televisions has been climbing, thereby facilitating solitary viewing; while in 1990, 54% of households had more than one black and white or colour televisions, by 2000 58% reported having at least two colour televisions.

Dinner-table discussions — times when families exchange news, make plans and converse — may be one of the casualties of the rising trend in aloneness. Even people who live with others are eating more meals alone. On an average day in 1998, 50% of adults living with others ate at least one meal alone compared with 36% in 1986. Among those who live on their own, half ate all their meals alone (approximately the same proportion as in 1986), while 11% ate all their meals with someone else (down from 15% in 1986). Younger individuals

8. Statistics Canada. 1971 Census of Population and 2001 Labour Force Survey.

9. In particular, men aged 45 to 64 spent 2.2 hours alone doing paid work in 1998, compared with 1.2 hours in 1986.

who lived alone were much less likely than older ones to eat all of their meals alone: 29% of 25- to 34-year-olds compared with 65% of seniors.

Women with young children have the least time alone

Nearly everyone spends some time during the day alone, even if it's only for a few minutes while driving to work after dropping off the kids at school.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, older people spend much more time by themselves than younger ones. In 1998, Canadians aged 75 or over spent 8.0 hours alone on an average day compared with 4.7 hours reported by 15- to 24-year-olds. Women under 65 years spend less time by themselves than men that age, possibly because they tend to be more involved in caring for their families and participating in social activities. Even on the job, however, women spend less time working alone than men: 30% of their paid work time versus 40% reported by men. This difference may reflect the fact that women are more concentrated in health care and teaching professions as well as sales and services occupations, which involve a lot of social interaction.

Children, especially young children, require a lot of attention. It is no surprise, then, that parents aged 25 to 44 spend less time alone on an average day (4.8 hours) than others. As children grow older and the need to spend time with them declines, parents' time alone rises to about the same level as that of people without children. Parents aged 45 to 64, who tend to have older children, spend 5.9 hours alone compared with 6.0 hours for people the same age without children. Mothers with children all under age 5 spent the least time alone — 3.6 hours on an average day — compared with 5.1 hours for mothers with children aged 5 to 12, and 5.7 hours for mothers with teenagers.

25% of Canadians would like more time alone

When the 1998 GSS asked Canadians if they wanted to spend more time alone, about one in four answered "yes." Not surprisingly, women aged 25 to 44 with children under 5 years were most likely to express this wish, 58%, compared with 34% of men in the same circumstances. When the children were older and required less care, mothers in this age group reported less need for more time alone. Because most seniors already spend a lot of time by themselves, few expressed a wish for more time alone (7%). And naturally, being time-stressed makes a difference. Among those who were highly time-stressed, 60% wanted more time alone compared with 31% of those with moderate levels of time stress and 8% with low levels.¹¹

Time alone influences happiness

According to the 1998 GSS, people who spent a lot of time by themselves were less likely to be very happy with their lives than those who spent little time alone. For example, 48% of those who spent less than 2 hours alone on an average day were very happy compared with 37% who spent 8 or more hours by themselves. This difference was greatest among seniors and almost non-existent among those aged 45 to 64.

Because people who live alone usually spend the most time alone, it is not surprising that they are less likely to be very happy than people who live with a spouse and children, or just a spouse. Lone parents aged 15 to 24 were the only group of people living with others who were less likely to be very happy than individuals this age living on their own. Overall, about 30% of people living alone felt very happy, compared with 44% of those with a spouse and children, and 48% with only a spouse. Part of the difference in happiness may be linked

to income (and people living alone generally have less income than those living with a partner), as people with higher incomes are more likely to say they are very happy.

Summary

A combination of factors has resulted in more Canadians living on their own than ever before. In addition, we are spending more time alone even if we live with others. Women with young children spend the least time by themselves and are most likely to wish they had more time on their own. In contrast, many seniors are by themselves a lot and as a result very few wish to spend more time alone. Time alone seems to influence our level of happiness — those who spend a lot of time alone are less likely to be very happy than those who spend very little time by themselves.

10. In 1998, 10% of the population aged 15 or over spent less than 1 hour alone on an average day while 19% spent more than 10 hours on their own.

11. Respondents were asked 10 questions to measure their perception of time stress. Answering "yes" to 7 or more questions classified someone as highly time stressed, "yes" to 4 to 6 questions as moderately time stressed and to 3 or fewer questions as having low levels of time stress. In 1998, 17% of the population aged 15 and over had high, while 30% had moderate levels of time stress.



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