

## Article

### Insights on Canadian Society

# Living apart together

by Martin Turcotte

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  - r revised
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  - e use with caution
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  - \*
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# Living apart together

by Martin Turcotte

## Overview of the study

A number of people are in a stable relationship but do not live together, and are known as non-cohabiting or 'living apart together' (LAT) couples. How many people are in such a situation? Are they transitioning towards a different kind of life together or making a deliberate lifestyle choice?

- In 2011, 7% of people age 20 and over representing 1.9 million Canadians were in a LAT couple. This proportion was slightly lower than in 2001.
- Young adults were more likely to be in a LAT couple. Among individuals age 20 to 24, nearly 1 in 3 were in a LAT couple (31%). This proportion was 17% among those age 25 to 29 and varied between 3% and 5% among those age 30 to 59.
- While only 2% of people 60 and over were in a LAT couple in 2011, this proportion was up slightly from 2001.
- More than 80% of young adults in a LAT couple wanted to live with their current partner one day, compared with less than 30% of people 60 and over.

## Introduction

In Canada and elsewhere, family statistics typically designate adults who are in couple relationships as married and living together or living together common-law. However, this does not mean that all other people are single—a sizeable portion of them are in a couple relationship without sharing the same dwelling. These people are referred to as living apart together (LAT)<sup>1</sup> couples.

Sociologists and demographers are paying increasing attention to this type of couple without cohabitation, for both their significance in relation to the evolution of couple relationships and the underlying social values.<sup>2</sup> Organizations that identify various social and demographic trends relevant to public policy are equally interested in studying such couples.<sup>3</sup>

How much attention does this type of couple merit? If the number of couples not living together is mainly concentrated among young adults who usually end up living together (married or common law) or separating, then the social and demographic consequences of LAT relationships may be less significant.

Conversely, if the duration and number of such relationships increased, there could be various consequences. For example, there could be an impact on the housing market and intentions to start a family. Among the elderly, whether a person lives with a new partner could have consequences for care provided by close relatives in the event of poor health. An increase in LAT couples could also have an impact on certain financial and legal matters since current family laws do not apply to LAT couples.

In Canada, the only data source that can be used to develop a profile of LAT couples is the 2011 and 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) on the family (see *Data sources, methods and definitions*). The family module of the GSS includes a series of detailed questions on marital topics, such as current marital status, marital history, and plans to have a family. It defines individuals in LAT couples as those who are not married or living common law, but who are in an "intimate couple relationship" with someone they were not living with at the time of the survey.

The first part of this article will be devoted to a profile of people in a LAT couple, as well as the evolution of such couples over the past decade. The second part of this article will look at the stability of LAT couples based on respondents' stage in life. In other words, do people in a LAT couple generally end up living together? For some, is LAT a choice that reflects a preference for living as a couple without sharing a dwelling?<sup>4</sup>

### Approximately 1 in 13 people are in a LAT couple

In 2011, approximately 1.9 million people (7.4%) age 20 and over were in a LAT couple, meaning they were single, widowed, divorced or separated but were in an intimate relationship with someone living in another dwelling (Table 1). This proportion was comparable to results obtained in other countries.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this group, there were approximately 240,000 people who, although married,<sup>6</sup> were living apart from their partner (see *Commuter marriages*). However, they represented less than 1% of the population age 20 and over.<sup>7</sup>

In comparison, the number of people in a LAT couple who were sharing the same dwelling was much higher. In 2011, about 14.3 million people age 20 and over (54.8% of the population) were married and living under the same roof. Another 3.2 million people (12.4% of Canadians age 20 and over) were living with a common-law partner. Finally, 6.4 million people were not in a stable couple relationship (24.5% of people age 20 and over).

Contrary to the perception that the proportion of people in a LAT couple is growing,<sup>8</sup> the proportion was actually lower in 2011 (7.4%) than it was in 2001 (8.4%). This decrease took place during the same period

**Table 1 Marital status of people age 20 and over, 2001 and 2011**

	Total			
	2001 number (thousands)	2011 percentage	2001 number (thousands)	2011 percentage
<b>Total</b>				
In a LAT <sup>1</sup> couple	1,899	1,930	8.4	7.4*
Married but living in a separate dwelling	131	240*	0.6	0.9*
Married	12,799	14,300*	56.7	54.8*
Living common law	2,381	3,237*	10.6	12.4*
No partner	5,352	6,393*	23.7	24.5

\* difference statistically significant in relation to 2001

1. Living apart together.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001 and 2011.

in which there was an increase in the number and proportion of people without a partner, while the proportion of people married and living common law remained stable.<sup>9</sup>

### Being in a LAT couple much more prevalent among young adults

Young adults, many of whom live with their parents, were much more likely to be in a LAT couple (Chart 1). Among 20- to 24-year-olds, nearly 1 in 3 were in a LAT couple (31%) while, in comparison, the corresponding proportion was 5% among those age 30 to 39. Among people age 70 and over, only 2% were in a stable couple relationship with someone living in another dwelling. While 20- to 24-year-olds represented 9% of the population age 20 and over, 38% of them were in a LAT couple (Chart 2).

Given the rather low proportions of people in a LAT couple within the older age groups, it might appear that population aging is responsible for the decline in the proportion of people in this type of couple. However, if the age structure in 2011 had remained identical to that in 2001, the decline would have been very similar. Rather, the decrease

occurred because people under age 60 were less likely to be in a LAT couple in 2011 than 10 years earlier. In fact, among those age 60 and over, the proportion in a LAT couple actually increased, albeit slightly.

There were also differences between age groups regarding other types of arrangements: while people age 20 to 34 were more likely to be single in 2011 than in 2001, those 60 and over became proportionally less likely to be single (Table 2). Older individuals were also more likely still to be living common law than 10 years earlier.<sup>10</sup>

Even though age remains the most important determining factor for this type of couple, other factors of lesser magnitude were also associated with the probability of being in a LAT couple (see *Data sources, methods and definitions: Factors associated with the likelihood of being in a LAT couple*).

### LAT relationships are short-lived

What are the other characteristics of people in a LAT couple? For one, the duration of such relationships was relatively short—for 2 in 3 people in a LAT couple, the relationship was less than 3 years old.

## Living apart together

**Chart 1 Close to 1 in 3 young adults age 20 to 24 were living apart together, 2011**



1. Living apart together.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2011.

In 2011, 20% of people in a LAT couple lived at least a 1-hour drive from their partner, 34% lived between a 30- and 60-minute drive away, and 45% lived in the same neighbourhood. These percentages varied little by age group, except for those 60 and over, who were more likely to live in the same neighbourhood as their LAT partner.

### Life choice or transition period?

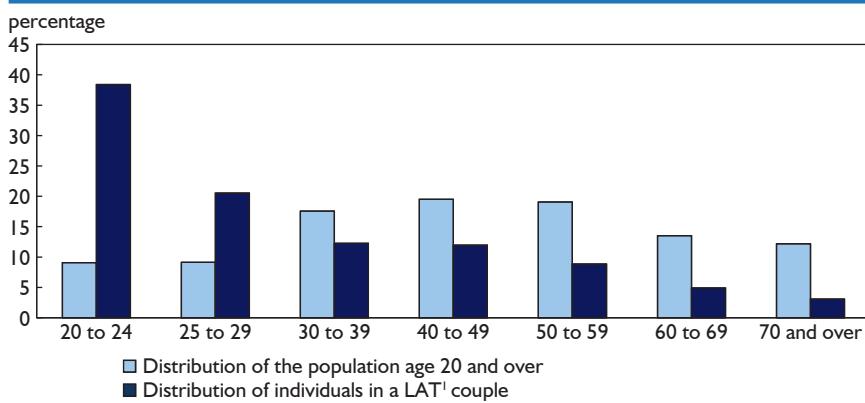
The duration results mentioned above may suggest that many LAT relationships are transitory for young adults, meaning such relationships would be relatively brief before marriage or living common law. Conversely, this type of relationship appears to last longer for older people, for whom this is often a second or third relationship.

Are people in a LAT couple by choice or out of necessity? Among young adults in particular, a LAT relationship may be necessary at their stage in life given the many financial constraints associated with postsecondary studies and the high cost of housing.<sup>11</sup> Older age groups are not immune from constraints either. For instance, both partners could have difficulty finding satisfactory job offers in the same area.

To determine whether a LAT relationship was the result of constraints, LAT individuals were asked: “What is the reason you are living apart?”

Many respondents answered this question by saying that they were obligated due to “circumstances” (42%). However, many others indicated the following reasons:

**Chart 2 Young adults age 20 to 24 made up 38% of all individuals in a LAT<sup>1</sup> couple, 2011**



1. Living apart together.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2011.

However, the average duration of a LAT couple varied considerably by age. As might be expected, it was shorter for younger people, with an average of 2.3 years among those age 20 to 29, compared with 3.8 years among those age 40 to 49 and 7.5 years among those 60 and over (Chart 3).

The vast majority of people were seriously involved enough in their relationship to tell their family and friends about it. In fact, 9 in 10 people in a LAT couple reported that most or all of their closest family and friends knew about their partner.

## Living apart together

**Table 2 Marital status<sup>1</sup> of people 20 and over, by age and sex, 2001 and 2011**

	Total		20 to 34		35 to 59		60 and over	
	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011	2001	2011
percentage								
<b>Total</b>								
In a LAT <sup>2</sup> couple	8.4	7.4*	19.6	17.9*	5.0	4.1*	1.8	2.3*
Living common law	10.6	12.6*	17.2	18.4	10.6	13.5*	2.0	4.8*
Married	57.3	55.5*	33.4	29.9*	68.4	66.3*	62.8	62.6
No partner	23.7	24.5	29.9	33.7*	16.1	16.1	33.5	30.3*
<b>Men</b>								
In a LAT <sup>2</sup> couple	9.0	7.3*	20.2	17.5	5.3	3.7*	2.4	2.9
Living common law	11.0	13.2*	15.7	16.6	11.5	14.7*	2.7	6.3*
Married	58.8	58.0	29.7	27.0	68.9	67.3	75.4	74.9
No partner	21.2	21.5	34.4	38.9*	14.3	14.3	19.6	15.9*
<b>Women</b>								
In a LAT <sup>2</sup> couple	7.8	7.5	19.0	18.4	4.7	4.6	1.3	1.8
Living common law	10.2	12.0*	18.6	20.3	9.7	12.3*	1.4	3.5*
Married	55.8	53.1*	37.1	32.8*	67.8	65.3*	52.3	52.0
No partner	26.2	27.4*	25.2	28.5*	17.8	17.9	45.0	42.7

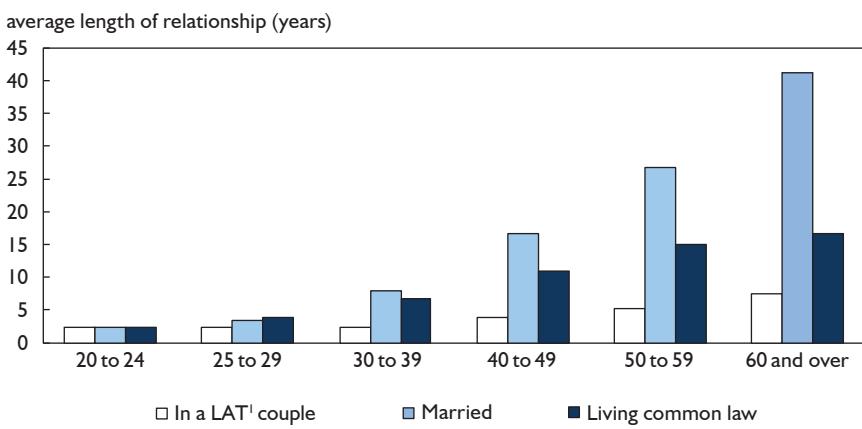
\* difference statistically significant in relation to 2001

I. Contrary to Table 1, Table 2 only shows those who are married or living common law and living in separate dwellings in the "Married" and "Common law" categories.

2. Living apart together.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001 and 2011.

**Chart 3 Length of relationship is relatively short on average among individuals in a LAT<sup>1</sup> couple, 2011**



I. Living apart together.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2011.

Those in a LAT couple by choice can be reasonably defined as those indicated in options a) and c). Choice was therefore clearly a factor in 39% of all cases.

However, as was the case for average duration, results varied considerably across age groups. Two-thirds of people 60 and over said that they were in a LAT couple by choice (they had decided to live apart, regardless of whether the partner agreed) while this was the case for less than a third of those age 20 to 24 (31%).

People living apart due to circumstances were asked to specify the major factor. "Studies circumstances" (26%) and "financial circumstances" (25%) were mentioned most, especially by younger adults under age 30. "Work circumstances" were identified by 15% of respondents,<sup>12</sup> and by 32% of those age 40 to 49.

Respondents who decided to live apart—those for whom a LAT relationship was a choice—were also asked to specify the main

- a) 32% reported that both partners had decided to live apart
- b) 17% reported that they had not considered the idea of living together
- c) 7% reported that they themselves wanted to live apart
- d) 1% said that their partner wanted to live apart.

reason they had opted for such an arrangement. Reflecting the fact that a number of LAT couples had been formed relatively recently and by young adults, the most frequently cited reason was “not yet ready for living together” (48%).<sup>13</sup> The desire to “keep independence,” often associated with couples living apart, accounted for 28% of people who were in a LAT couple by choice, and for 11% of all LAT couples.

The desire to remain independent increased with age. For example, 37% of all people 60 and over in a LAT couple stated that this was a choice motivated by a desire to remain independent. In comparison, only 15% of those age 40 to 49 and 4% of those age 20 to 24 provided this reason.<sup>14</sup>

### Intentions to live together

The results presented thus far indicate that a significant number of LAT relationships are transitional, especially for younger people—some have been in a relationship for only a short time and many are in a LAT couple due to circumstances rather than by choice. Similar conclusions were obtained through a series of questions on future living intentions.

When asked whether they intended to live with their current partner, the vast majority of people in a LAT couple answered yes (33% said “certainly yes” and another 37% said “probably yes”). Overall, less than 1 in 6 people in a LAT couple said that they did not intend to live with their partner in the future. However, almost 60% of people age 60 and over did not intend to do so (Chart 4).<sup>15</sup>

If people are in a LAT relationship by choice and also say they do not intend to live with their partner, then these relationships can be considered non-transitional. According to these criteria, only 11% of people in a LAT couple were in a non-transitional relationship that was wanted and pictured for the future. However, the proportion went from 4% among those age 20 to 34, to 17% among those age 35 to 59, and to 42% among those 60 and over.

With the aging of the population, it will be interesting to follow the evolution of stable and non-transitional LAT couples over time. Other studies have shown that people who are currently moving into their sixties (baby boomers) are much more likely than previous

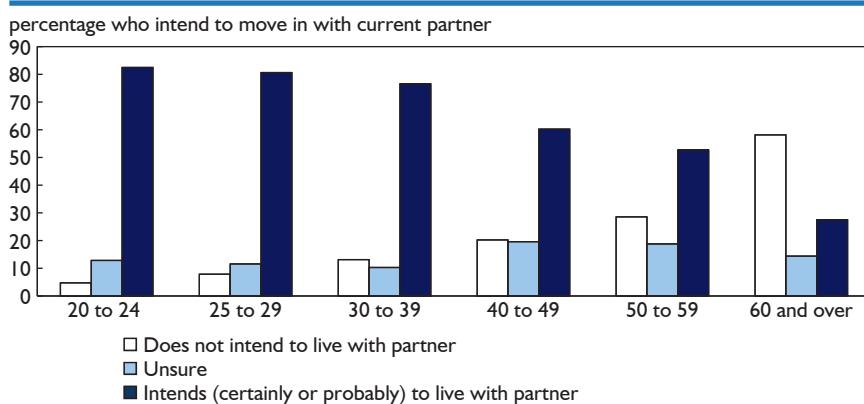
cohorts to be part of a LAT couple.<sup>16</sup> The figures appear to confirm this trend, since, among those 60 and over, there was a decrease in the proportion of people not in a stable relationship and a slight increase in LAT couples. However, the number of senior LAT couples remains low.

### Conclusion

People in a LAT couple are a minority of the adult population in Canada—approximately 1 in 13 people among those age 20 and over. This proportion has even declined slightly over the last 10 years. Those most likely to be in this type of couple are mainly young adults. However, trends are moving downward for younger people and slightly upward for older people.

Since LAT couples remain concentrated among younger people, their reasons for being in this type of couple are usually motivated by constraints—although some are in it by choice, especially among older age groups. The aging of the population could therefore have an impact on this type of relationship in the future. The number of people in a LAT couple who wanted to continue to live as such increased noticeably among older people between 2001 and 2011. This is an important trend as the number of widows and widowers will undoubtedly increase in the future. In this regard, LAT relationships could be a source of emotional support and contribute to the wellbeing of some seniors who do not necessarily want to enter into another couple relationship and live together.<sup>17</sup> There will certainly be much more to follow on LAT couples in future.

**Chart 4 Intention of moving in with partner decreases with age, 2011**



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2011.

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## Data sources, methods and definitions

This article is based on data from the 2011 and 2001 General Social Survey (GSS). Both of these survey cycles were on the family.

The analysis covered people age 20 and over, the same subsample used in a 2003 study published by Statistics Canada.<sup>1</sup>

Some LAT couples are same-sex, however it is not possible, with data from the 2011 General Social Survey, to determine exactly how this applies to Canada. The increase or decrease in cohabitation for same-sex partners can indeed influence trends relating to the number of people in a LAT couple relationship.<sup>2</sup>

### Definitions

**Person in a living apart together (LAT) couple:** Refers to people who were neither married nor living common law at the time of the survey were asked the following question: "Are you currently in an intimate couple relationship with someone you are not living with?" All people who answered "yes" were determined to be in a LAT couple.

**Commuter marriage:** Refers to people who were either married or living common law at the time of the survey, but whose partner was currently living in another dwelling.

### Factors associated with the likelihood of being in a LAT relationship

A multinomial logit model was used to identify the other factors (in addition to age) that could be associated with a LAT relationship. This model calculates the probability of being in one of the four family situations described in the article—LAT, married, living common law, or living alone. The factors taken into account include sex, age, education level, personal income, having experienced a separation or divorce, immigrant status, weekly religious-service attendance, and place of residence (see Table A.1).

While age is certainly an explanatory factor, other factors are also associated with a higher probability of being in a LAT couple. Men and women who had experienced at least one divorce or separation in the past, especially if they were living with a child from a previous relationship, were considerably more likely to enter into a LAT relationship than those who had never had such an experience. Some separated or divorced people chose to be in a LAT relationship to maintain their independence and avoid falling into habits that they associated with their previous relationships.<sup>3</sup> Among those with children, the decision to live together would have even more consequences since it would result in the creation of a blended family. People with a higher level of education were also more likely to be in a LAT relationship.

In contrast, people who attended religious meetings or services at least once a week and recent immigrants were slightly less inclined than others to be in a LAT couple. These findings align with those from other studies showing that moral or cultural values are sometimes associated with the acceptability of non-cohabiting intimate relationships.

### Notes

1. See Milan and Peters (2003).
2. The 2011 Census, for example, reported 64,575 same-sex couples, up considerably from 2006 (42%) (Statistics Canada 2012). In 2011, there may have been a slight overestimate of the number of people in a same-sex couple due to a change in the way couples are counted (the overestimate could be as much as 4,500 Canada-wide).
3. See Haskey and Lewis (2006).

**Table A.1 Predicted probability of relationship type, multinomial logistic model, 2011**

	In a LAT <sup>1</sup> couple	Living common law	Married	No partner	predicted probability	
					Sex	Age
Men	0.053	0.100	0.605	0.242		
Women	0.054	0.104	0.566	0.276		
<b>Sex</b>						
20 to 24	0.368	0.094	0.027	0.511		
25 to 29	0.188	0.235	0.237	0.339		
30 to 39	0.048	0.167	0.630	0.156		
40 to 49	0.032	0.097	0.733	0.137		
50 to 59	0.025	0.069	0.750	0.156		
60 to 69	0.019	0.041	0.777	0.163		
70 and over	0.022	0.023	0.540	0.415		

### Data sources, methods and definitions (continued)

**Table A.1 Predicted probability of relationship type, multinomial logistic model, 2011 (continued)**

	In a LAT <sup>1</sup> couple	Living common law	Married	No partner
predicted probability				
<b>Attended mass or religious assembly at least once a week</b>				
No	0.056	0.125	0.564	0.255
Yes	0.042	0.038	0.656	0.263
<b>Highest level of education</b>				
Less than a high school diploma	0.037	0.131	0.530	0.302
High school diploma	0.050	0.099	0.571	0.280
College diploma or trades certificate	0.056	0.099	0.611	0.234
University degree	0.069	0.094	0.597	0.240
<b>Income</b>				
Less than \$20,000	0.054	0.079	0.553	0.314
\$20,000 to \$39,999	0.059	0.112	0.528	0.301
\$40,000 to \$59,999	0.061	0.127	0.560	0.252
\$60,000 to \$99,999	0.052	0.110	0.641	0.197
\$100,000 or more	0.032	0.099	0.741	0.128
No data	0.049	0.088	0.602	0.261
<b>At least one separation or divorce</b>				
No	0.035	0.076	0.702	0.187
Yes	0.112	0.175	0.313	0.400
Yes and living with a child from a previous relationship	0.136	0.099	0.130	0.635
<b>Immigrant status</b>				
Recent immigrant (1996 to 2011)	0.016	0.040	0.789	0.155
Established immigrant (before 1996)	0.069	0.066	0.595	0.270
Canadian-born/Canadian citizens by birth	0.058	0.118	0.557	0.267
<b>Quebec resident</b>				
No	0.053	0.077	0.620	0.251
Yes	0.054	0.232	0.450	0.265

Note: The predicted probabilities were calculated based on the multinomial logistic model. To calculate the predicted probabilities, the average values of the covariates were used in the analytical sample. The predicted probabilities are 0, meaning there is no chance the individual is in a relationship, or 1, meaning than an individual with certain characteristics has a 100% chance of being in a relationship.

1. Living apart together.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2011.

### Commuter marriages

People who are married or living common law but who also live apart could be deemed to be in a commuter marriage. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of people in a commuter marriage increased from 131,000 in 2001 (0.6% of the population age 20 and over) to 240,000 in 2011 (0.9% of the population age 20 and over). Other research has shown that the rise in this type of couple was largely due to the increase in dual-working couples.<sup>1</sup>

According to the GSS, 28% of the roughly 240,000 married people and those living common law who were living apart were in this situation because their partner had not immigrated to Canada. Work circumstances were also a factor (22%). Among these, the vast majority said that they intended to live with their partner again within the next year.

The partner's health was sometimes cited as a reason by people who were married or living common law and living apart from their partner—8% said they were separated because their partner was in a nursing home and another 8% said it was because their partner was in a medical care facility.

#### Note

- See Forsyth and Gramling (1998).

### Notes

1. In the specialized literature on this subject, LAT is frequently used when referring to couples living alone together.
2. See Duncan and Phillips (2011) and Bawin-Legros and Gauthier (2001).
3. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe has recognized LAT relationships as one of the five types of emerging families (UNECE 2011). Various statistical agencies now also collect information on LAT couples like those in the United Kingdom (Haskey 2005) and Australia (Reimondos et al. 2011).
4. In some cases, cohabitation may be followed by a LAT relationship. However, it is not possible to determine the extent using data from the General Social Survey.
5. The definition of couples living apart together is not uniform from one country to another. This said, other studies have found comparable proportions of adult LAT couples—10% in Britain (Duncan and Phillips 2011), 9% in Australia (Reimondos et al. 2011), approximately 6% in France (in 2005) and 6% to 7% in the United States (Strohm et al. 2009).
6. This group includes a small number of respondents who described themselves as partners living common law. It is possible that these people who lived together without being married are still a couple, but by choice or out of necessity were living apart for one reason or another at the time of the interview.
7. Given the low proportion of individuals in a commuter marriage, this group is considered married or living common law for the rest of the article.
8. See Wolfe-Wylie (2011).
9. Bootstrap weights were used for the significance testing of differences between 2001 and 2011.
10. The increase in male life expectancy and the fact that growing numbers of seniors end up in a second or third relationship explain these trends. For example, between 2001 and 2011, the proportion of people 60 and over who had experienced two or more relationships during their lifetime went from 14% to 26%. However, non-cohabiting couples (2.3% of cases among people 60 and over), just like couples living common law (4.8% of cases), remain relatively rare among older people (Table 2).
11. For example, this was the case in Spain (Castro-Marin et al. 2008).
12. People who cited work-related reasons were much more likely to live apart from their partner—approximately 7 in 10 were living at least a 1-hour drive away, compared with only 2 in 10 for all LAT couples.
13. This response includes all people who chose not to live together, whether the decision was made by the respondent only, by his or her partner only or, as is most often the case, by mutual agreement.
14. This desire for independence was especially widespread among women 60 and over—46% of them cited maintaining their independence as their reason for being in a LAT couple, compared with 30% of men in the same age group. Some studies have suggested that women, because they had to assume responsibility for most household chores, were more likely to say they were in a LAT couple to maintain their independence. For more information, see Ghazanfareeon Karlsson and Borell (2002).
15. This result was also found in Australia (Reimondos et al. 2011).
16. See De Jong Gierveld (2004).
17. One of the positive aspects frequently cited by older LAT couples is the emotional and practical support these relationships bring. However, providing care to a partner with a long-term health problem would be less natural for couples living in separate dwellings since the level of responsibility for a non-cohabiting partner is often lower (Ghazanfareeon Karlsson and Borell 2002).

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