

The Crowded Nest: Young adults at home

by *Monica Boyd and Doug Norris*

Becoming an adult involves many changes in a teenager's life. Leaving high school, going to college or university, getting a full-time job, becoming economically self-sufficient, getting married — all these are commonly accepted indicators of being an adult. Since these changes often go hand in hand with leaving the parental home, many people also think of “moving out” as being part of the transition to adulthood.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, most people viewed the steps to adulthood as sequential and irreversible. Today, however, these changes are not one-time-only events that occur in sequence. Young Canadians may stay in school and live with a partner, rather than first completing school and then legally marrying. They also may find jobs and subsequently, or simultaneously, return to school. And they may continue to live with their parents, or move out and then move back in, throughout these schooling, employment and family-building years.

According to Canadian censuses, the proportions of young adults who lived with their parents fell between 1971 and 1981, following the general twentieth century trend toward non-familial living arrangements for the young and the older generations. Since then, however, the transition to adulthood has become more dynamic and young adults are now more likely to live with parents. This article uses census data from 1981 to 1996 to examine the growing phenomenon of young adults living at home.

Young adults now more likely to live with their parents

Since 1981, the percentage of young adults in their twenties and early thirties living in the parental home has been increasing. In 1996, 23% of young women aged 20 to 34 lived at home, up from 16% in 1981. Over the same period, the percentage of young men the same age residing in the parental home rose to 33% from 26%. Most of the increase



CST What you should know about this study

This article is based on the Census of Population. Young persons living with parents were identified as any woman or man aged 20 to 34 co-residing with at least one biological or adoptive parent. Those living with parents are also referred to as “living at home.” Using this data source, it is not possible to identify whether these young adults have continually lived with their parents or have returned after living elsewhere for a period of time.

Unmarried: a young adult who was not married at the time of the Census, including divorced or separated, widowed as well as never-married.

Married: a young adult who was either legally married or living common-law.

took place from 1981 to 1986 and from 1991 to 1996, both periods of economic recession and slow recovery.

The growing propensity to live at home was common to both unmarried and married young adults. In 1996, nearly half (47%) of unmarried women aged 20 to 34 lived with parents, up from 44% in 1981. More than half of young unmarried men also resided in the parental home, about the same as in 1981. Despite a brief decline from 1986 to 1991, by 1996, the percentages of young unmarried adults living with their parents were the highest in 15 years.

In Canada and other industrial countries, young couples are usually expected to establish residences separate from those of their parents; as a result, not many young adults in common-law or legal marriages reside with their parents. Nevertheless, in 1996 a higher percentage of young married adults (including common-law) were living in the parental home than in 1981. Unlike their unmarried counterparts, the proportion of married young adults living with their parents has risen steadily over the past 15 years.

Young adults living at home are older and the majority are men

One of the most notable shifts in the characteristics of young adults living at home is that they are older. In 1981, only about one-quarter of unmarried women and men living with their parents were aged 25 or over; by 1996, the percentages had risen to 33% and 40%, respectively.

Changes were even more pronounced for young adults who were married, jumping from 52% of women and 64% of men in 1981, to 69% and 78% in 1996.

Many other studies in Canada and the United States have found that the living arrangements of young adults differ considerably by gender. Smaller percentages of young women live at home, which researchers speculate may be partly explained by gender roles. Parents may more closely supervise the social lives of their daughters than their sons, so that women may feel they have more independence living elsewhere. Researchers also suggest that, because they are more involved in household tasks as teenagers, young women may be better able to take care of themselves in terms of cooking, cleaning and laundry skills.¹

Differences in the way families assign chores to men and women may also deter young women from living with their parents. When at home, young women report spending more hours doing housework than young men, whereas

1. Boyd, Monica and Edward T. Pryor. 1989. "The Cluttered Nest: The Living Arrangements of Young Canadian Adults," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 15: 462-479. DaVanzo, Julie and Francis Kobrin Goldscheider. 1990. "Coming Home Again: Returns to the Parental Home of Young Adults," *Population Studies*, 44 : 241-255. Ward, Russell A. and Glenna Spitze. 1992. "Consequence of Parent-Adult Child Co-residence: A Review and Research Agenda," *Journal of Family Issues*, 13: 553-572.

	The proportion of young adults living at home has been rising over the past 15 years							
	Percent living with parents							
	Total	Unmarried			Total	Married*		
20-24		25-29	30-34	20-24		25-29	30-34	
Women								
1981	44	60	27	18	1	3	1	1
1986	46	64	32	18	2	3	2	1
1991	44	63	33	19	2	5	2	1
1996	47	67	36	19	3	7	4	2
Men								
1981	55	69	40	28	2	3	2	1
1986	57	72	45	30	2	4	2	1
1991	53	71	44	29	3	6	3	1
1996	56	74	48	32	4	9	5	3

* Married includes legal marriages and common-law relationships.
Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

young men are more likely to pay room and board.² Another explanation could be that women outnumber men as lone parents, since the presence of children dampens the likelihood of young women living with parents.

Education, labour markets and marriage are factors at work

The growing tendency of young adults aged 25 and over to co-reside with their parents suggests that fundamental changes are occurring in the living arrangements of young Canadians. And indeed, this increase has coincided with significant social and economic changes. Starting in the 1960s, the expansion of colleges and universities has led to higher rates of enrollment, extending young people's adolescence and their dependence on their parents. The economy likewise has gone through several business cycles, recording prolonged boom times but also periods of severe

recession, when young people generally experience higher rates of unemployment than older adults.

Fluctuations in living arrangements and in school enrollments of young adults are sensitive to labour market conditions.³ The upswing in young unmarried adults living at home between 1981 and 1986 coincided with a severe recession in the early 1980s. A more prolonged recession occurred in the early 1990s, and was followed by increased percentages of young adults at home in 1996. Economic downturns do not mean that young adults automatically either stay in the parental home or move back in. But living with parents can be one of the ways in which young adults respond to unemployment, relatively low wages or low incomes while attending school.

In 1996, for example, 71% of unmarried women aged 20 to 29 who were full-time students lived at home, as did 66% of unmarried men with incomes of only \$10,000 to \$14,999 a year. These patterns are consistent with other studies which suggest that co-residency is a strategy for minimizing the household expenditures of young adults. But it also may represent an economic strategy for the family. When living together, parents and children can share

CST Full-time students were most likely to live at home

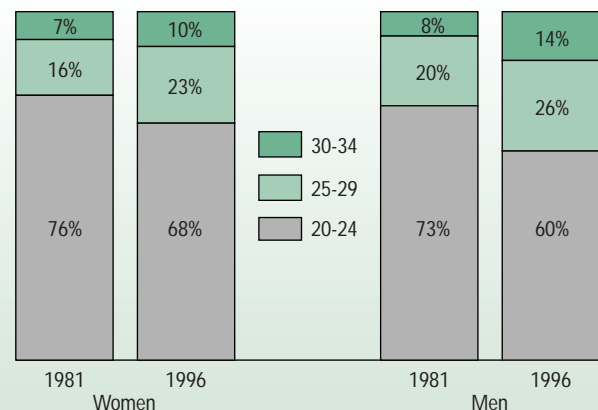
	Percent of young adults aged 20-29 living at home			
	Unmarried		Married	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
All	55	63	5	6
School attendance				
Full-time	71	76	6	7
Part-time	52	64	5	6
Not attending	45	56	5	6
Labour force status				
Not in labour force	52	69	6	9
In labour force	56	62	5	6
Employed	56	61	4	5
Unemployed	58	68	7	8
Income				
Less than \$5,000	69	75	6	10
\$5,000-9,999	65	70	6	9
\$10,000-14,999	47	66	5	8
\$15,000-19,999	43	61	4	7
\$20,000-29,999	42	54	4	6
\$30,000-39,999	34	43	3	4
\$40,000 or more	27	33	2	3

Note: Because the proportion of 30- to 34-year-olds living with parents is quite small, data are presented for the population aged 20 to 29 only.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

- Ward, Russell A. and Glenna Spitze. 1996. "Gender Differences in Parent-Child Coresidence Experiences," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58: 718-725.
- Boyd, Monica and Doug Norris. 1995. *The Cluttered Nest Revisited: Young Adults at Home*. Working Paper Series 94-127, Center for the Study of Population and Demography, Florida State University. Card, David and Thomas Lemieux. Forthcoming. "Adapting to Circumstances: The Evolution of Work, School and Living Arrangements Among North American Youth," in *Youth Unemployment and Employment in Advanced Countries*, David Blanchflower and Richard Freeman (eds.). University of Chicago Press for the National Bureau of Economic Research.

CST At least one-third of young unmarried adults living at home are now aged 25 and over



Note: Data may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1981 and 1996 Censuses of Population.

resources and adopt economies of scale with respect to food and shelter costs.⁴ It should also be noted that there can be a cultural component to such living arrangements, since rates of co-residence with parents are greater for some ethnic and immigrant groups than for others.⁵

CST What might have been

Noteworthy as they are, the increases in the percentages of young adults living at home would be even greater if the age structure of this population had not changed over the period. Between 1981 and 1996, the age profile of the population aged 20 to 34 became older, resulting in proportionately fewer young adults in their early twenties and proportionately more in their late twenties and early thirties. Since children tend to move away from home as they get older, the aging of the young adult population has artificially reduced the overall percentage of 20- to 34-year-olds living at home. If the age profile had been the same in 1996 as in 1981, young adults would be even more likely to be living at home with their parents — 26% of all young women and 36% of all young men.

Percent of young adults aged 20 to 34 living with parents (age standardized)*

	Unmarried	Married
Women		
1981	44	1
1986	47	2
1991	47	3
1996	50	4
Men		
1981	55	2
1986	59	2
1991	57	3
1996	60	5

* Age standardization is a technique adopted when the age profile of a population (in this case, those aged 20 to 34) has changed significantly and might affect the results of comparisons over time. The population in this study has been standardized to the 1981 age distribution, using sex specific age distributions for unmarried women and men.

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

A final factor underlying the increasing percentage of young adults co-residing with parents is that they are remaining unmarried longer. Since the mid-1970s, the rate of first (legal) marriage has declined and the average age at marriage has increased. Women marrying for the first time were on average about three years older in 1996 than in 1981 — 27 versus 24 years. Similarly, men married at the more mature age of 29, compared with 26. And although the drop in legal marriage has been somewhat offset by an increase in common-law marriages, the percentage of young adults who are unmarried rose substantially between 1981 and 1996: from 35% to 45% for women, and from 45% to 56% for men.

Summary

Many young Canadian adults live with parents not just in their late teenage years but also throughout their twenties and early thirties. Interpretations of this phenomenon vary. One view assumes that living apart from the family of origin signals the successful transition to adulthood, alongside other indicators such as completion of education, employment, marriage and childbearing. From this perspective, the continued presence of adult children in the parental home is unusual.

Yet a more general lesson from the 1980s and 1990s emphasizes the fallacy of holding a narrow image of family life. The forms of Canadian families are diverse and constantly changing over the life cycle of their individual members. From this perspective, young adults live at home because this arrangement ultimately benefits them in making other types of transitions from adolescence to adulthood.

4. Grisgby, Jill S. 1989. "Adult Children in the Parental Household: Who Benefits?" *Population Studies*, 44: 241-255.

5. Boyd, Monica. 1998. *Birds of a Feather: Ethnic Variations in Young Adults Living at Home*. Working Paper Series 98-140. Center for the Study of Population and Demography, Florida State University.



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