

Mobile homes in Canada

by Frances Kremarik and Cara Williams

*H*ave you ever been zooming down a highway only to come upon the taillights of a police vehicle providing a safety buffer behind an extra wide load carrying a mobile home? As you slow down, do you ever wonder where the mobile is going or who lives in a mobile home? Perhaps you think back to the first time that you saw a mobile on a highway or local road. Maybe you just wonder why they are called 'mobiles' when they have to be transported by another vehicle at such slow speeds.

CST What you should know about this study

This article is based on data from the 1996 Census of Population. In addition to responding to general socio-economic questions (such as age, educational attainment, and labour force status), each household was asked about the state of repairs required to their dwelling as well as other dwelling features such as the number of rooms and the number of bedrooms. Information on housing type was recorded by the census enumerators.

Mobile home or mobile: a single dwelling, designed and constructed to be transported on its own chassis and capable of being moved to a new location on short notice. It may be placed temporarily on a foundation such as blocks, posts or a prepared pad which may be converted by a skirt. If placed on a permanent foundation, it is considered (for census purposes) to be a single detached dwelling.

Urban: an urban area is an area that has attained a population concentration of at least 1,000 and a population density of at least 400 per square kilometre.

Small town: an urban area that has a population of less than 30,000.

Rural: areas that lie outside urban areas.

Rural farm residents: members of rural farm operator households who live on their farm for any length of time during the 12-month period prior to the census.

Rural non-farm residents: people who live in rural areas that are not classified as being farms.

Built on a chassis, mobile homes and travel trailers were synonymous until about 1960 — both were trailers that were also private dwellings. At about this time, the industry restructured and since then a distinction has been made between the trailer used for camping (the travel trailer or recreation vehicle) and the trailer used as a house. While travelers can pull their trailers from campground to campground, once a mobile home has been placed on a site, it often remains rooted.

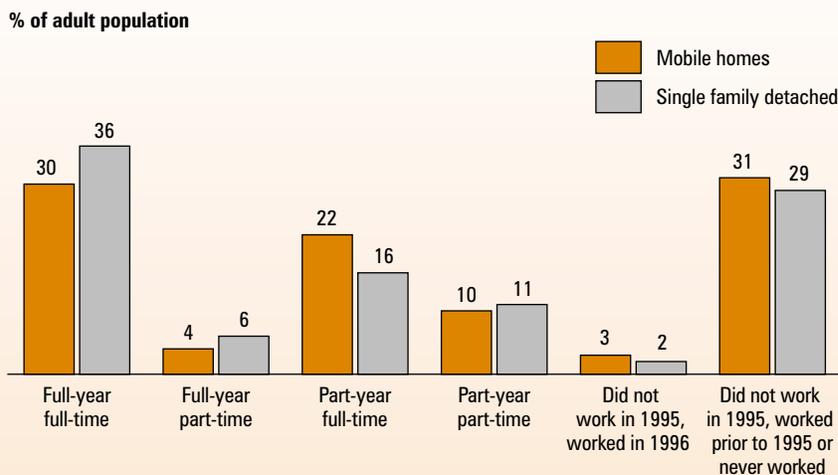
This article examines the characteristics of people living in mobile homes, with special emphasis on the differences between rural and urban households. Because mobiles are single family homes with a chassis instead of a foundation, mobile home households are compared to those residing in single family detached dwellings.

Over hill, over dale...

In 1996, there were more than 150,000 mobile homes in Canada, representing about 1% of total private dwellings. Although they are not as common as other types of housing, they can be found in every province and territory. In 1996, British Columbia and Alberta accounted for almost half (48%) of mobile homes in Canada. Mobile homes represented 3% of occupied dwellings in BC and 4% in Alberta. In other provinces, usage varied widely from Newfoundland, where they made up less than 1% of all dwellings, to the Yukon and Northwest Territories, where they accounted for 9% and 8%, respectively.¹

Mobile homes are both a rural and an urban phenomenon. Indeed, over half (57%) of all mobile homes in Canada are located in rural areas (both farms and non-farms) and another 22% are in towns and small cities with populations under 30,000. These figures are not surprising. In

CST Adults in mobile homes are less likely to work in full-year full-time employment



Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

rural areas mobile homes can be a low-cost and low-maintenance retirement home for seniors; on farms they may represent an easily installed farmhouse or additional living quarters. In smaller urban areas, mobile homes allow for the fast expansion of housing stock in economic boom times; for example, more than 70% of the mobiles in the Yukon are in small towns. For the most part, however, mobile homes are restricted in many large urban centres by municipal by-laws.

Nearly half of mobile home residents are younger than 30

In general, the age structure of people living in mobile homes is similar to that of people living in single detached houses. In 1996, 45% of mobile home residents were under 30 compared with 41% of single family home occupants. Seniors 65 and older made up 10% of the population in mobiles and 11% of residents in single detached homes.

The family structure of households in mobile homes does, however, differ from that of people in single detached houses. Mobile homes are almost

twice as likely to house only one individual than are single homes: 24% versus 14% respectively. This is to be expected as mobile homes are generally less costly to own and maintain, and one-person households generally have lower incomes than other types of households. The lower cost may also be an attraction for lone-parent families who made up 10% of households in mobile homes compared with 8% in single family homes.

Couples with one child are almost as likely to be found in a mobile home as in a single detached home, at 13% and 15% respectively. However, larger families are clearly more comfortable in bigger houses. For example, two-parent families with two or more children account for 31% of single detached households, but only 19% of mobile households. The one exception occurs on farms, where

1. Since these data are from the 1996 Census, the Northwest Territories in this article includes both the current Northwest Territories and Nunavut, which did not become a separate territory until April 1, 1999.

larger families are equally likely to live in mobile homes and single family dwellings.

Since they are built to be moveable, mobile homes are smaller than conventional single family dwellings: nearly all mobiles (94%) have between 4 and 6 rooms, while close to half of single detached homes have between 7 and 9 rooms. Although mobile homes tend to house single people and smaller families, they are more likely to be somewhat crowded. Ten percent of mobiles have a crowding index² of 1.0 or higher, compared with 3% of single family dwellings. Crowding is even more common in rural farm areas (22%) where mobiles are more likely to house families with two or more children.

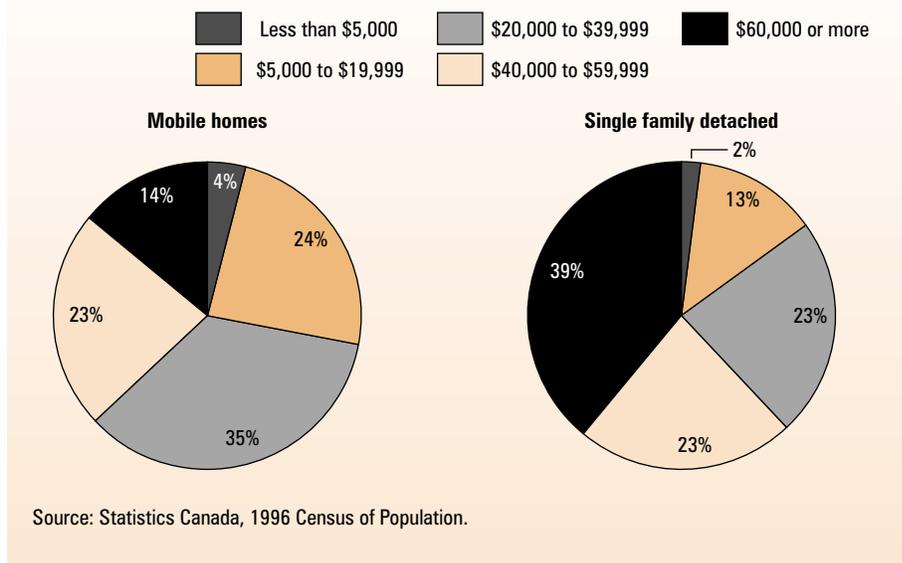
Lower income and education common among mobile home residents

One-half of all Canadians in mobile homes, compared with 36% of those in single family dwellings, had not completed their high school education;³ mobile residents were also much less likely to have finished a university diploma or degree (4% versus 15%). This difference in educational attainment is smaller in rural than in urban areas. While half of mobile home residents in rural areas have not completed their secondary education, neither have 44% of single family detached dwellers. In urban areas, however, figures for less than high school completion are 50% for mobile residents compared with 33% for dwellers in single detached homes. Differences in post-secondary attainment are also quite noticeable in urban areas; only 2% of mobile residents have obtained a bachelor's or higher degree, while almost 16% of single detached dwellers have done so.

Being without higher educational qualifications usually affects a person's employment profile.⁴ In 1996, 30% of mobile home residents were

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Households in mobile homes have lower incomes than those in single family detached houses



employed full-time full-year (49 to 52 weeks); another 22% had worked full-time but had not been employed year-round. In contrast, 36% of adults in single family homes worked full-time full-year and only 16% were full-time workers without full-year employment.

Nevertheless, the majority of mobile home residents (60%) reported wages as their major source of income; this was similar to the rate for households in single family dwellings (63%). On the other hand, 28% of households living in mobile homes stated that government transfers were the major component of their income, compared with 20% of single family households.

Mobile home residents had lower household income than those in single detached houses. Almost one quarter of households in mobiles had an annual income between \$5,000 and \$20,000 in 1995; this represents nearly twice the proportion of those living in single family dwellings. While 35% of mobile home households reported an income between \$20,000 and \$40,000, nearly the same proportion (39%) of households in

single family dwellings had incomes of \$60,000 or more.

This income disparity was most evident in urban areas; 45% of single family households had incomes of \$60,000 or more compared with 15% of mobile home dwellers. Similarly, 27% of urban mobile households reported an income under \$20,000 while only 12% of single detached households were in the same situation. The income gap was not as wide in rural areas, where 29% of mobile and 21% of single detached households had incomes under \$20,000; incomes over \$60,000 were reported by 13% of mobile and 27% of single home residents.

- The crowding index is the number of persons per room. Bathrooms, kitchens, and closets are not included in the number of rooms.
- Population numbers and rates used for highest academic achievement refer only to Canadians who are 15 years of age or older.
- Crompton, S. 1995. "Employment prospects for high school graduates." *Perspectives on Labour and Income* 7, 3: 8-13.

	Total	Rural %	Urban
Mobile homes			
Couple with no children	29	29	29
Couple with one child	13	13	13
Couple with two or more children	19	21	16
Lone-parent families	10	9	12
One-person households	24	24	25
Other	5	4	5
Single family detached			
Couple with no children	27	30	27
Couple with one child	15	15	16
Couple with two or more children	31	30	32
Lone-parent families	7	7	8
One-person households	14	15	13
Other	6	3	4

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.
Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

A place to call home

Many people want to own their homes, no matter how modest their income and for some, mobile homes make a good choice. They are cheaper than more conventional housing: the average value of mobile homes in 1995 was about \$43,500, less than one-third that of a single detached home. Lower priced mobile homes provide persons who might not otherwise be able to afford to purchase a home with a low-cost ownership alternative. Some 77% of mobile homes were owner-occupied, compared with 87% of single family homes.

In addition, mobile homes have lower shelter costs thus contributing to their affordability.⁵ While only 8% of single detached owner-occupied households have monthly shelter costs of less than \$200, 34% of mobile

dwellers did. At the other end of the scale, 27% of single detached homeowners spent \$1,000 or more every month on shelter costs compared with only 5% of mobile owners. Approximately 85% of all homeowners, mobile and single detached, spent less than 30% of their income on shelter.

The construction techniques that make mobiles portable may contribute to their need for repairs, which is considerably higher than that of single homes. In 1996, most mobile homes were in good condition and required only minor repairs or regular maintenance. However, 14% needed major repairs, compared with 9% of single detached homes. Mobile homes in rural areas were moderately more likely to need major repairs than those in urban sites (15% versus 12%); the same pattern applied to single detached dwellings: 12% of rural

homes versus 7% of urban ones needed major repairs.

Summary

More than half of all mobile homes are in rural areas, and they can be seen in every province and territory. Almost half are home to small families, and another quarter house a single individual. The majority of mobile households rely on wages as their major source of income, but many residents are not employed full-time year-round. Mobile homes are in greater need of major repair than single detached dwellings, but they are nonetheless an alternative option for people seeking home ownership. When someone says “home” the word conjures up different meanings for different people. For 380,000 Canadians, home is a mobile.

5. Shelter costs include payments for electricity, oil, gas, coal, wood or other fuels, water and other municipal services, monthly mortgage payments, and property taxes (municipal and school).



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