

Update on families

This article is adapted from *Profile of Canadian Families and Households: Diversification Continues*, published as part of the October 22, 2002 data release on families from the 2001 Census. This document is available from the Statistics Canada Web site at www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/analytic/companion/fam/pdf/96F0030XIE2001003.pdf.

With the release of data from the 2001 Census, much new information on the state of Canadian families has become available. This update outlines the major changes that have occurred within families and their living arrangements over the last 20 years.

Canadians continue to marry and have children. However, marital histories are becoming more complex. Common-law unions, lone-parent families, smaller households and people living alone are on the rise.

In 2001, the proportion of “traditional families” — mom, dad and kids — continued to decline, while families with no children at home were on the rise. Married or common-law couples with children aged 24 and under living at home represented only 44% of all families in Canada, down from 55% in 1981. At the same time, couples who had no children living at home accounted for 41% of all families in 2001, up from 34% in 1981. In 2001, lone-parent families increased to 16% of all families from 11% in 1981.

Behind this shift in living arrangements are diverse factors, such as lower

fertility rates, delayed childbearing or a rise in the number of childless couples. In addition, because life expectancy is increasing, couples have more of their lives to spend together as “empty-nesters” after their children have grown up and left home.

Common-law relationships more frequent, especially among the young

The proportion of couples who live in common-law arrangements is on the rise. In 2001, 16% of all couples lived common-law up from 6% in 1981. The rate in 2001 is substantially higher than that in the United States, where 8% of couples lived common-law, but is much lower than in Sweden (30%) and Norway (24%). The trend toward common-law was strongest in Quebec, where 30% of all couples lived in common-law unions in 2001, a rate similar to that in Sweden.

Although common-law relationships are most popular among the young, they are also becoming more acceptable among older generations. In 2001, 48% of 20- to 29-year-olds who lived as a couple were in a common-law union, compared with 5% of

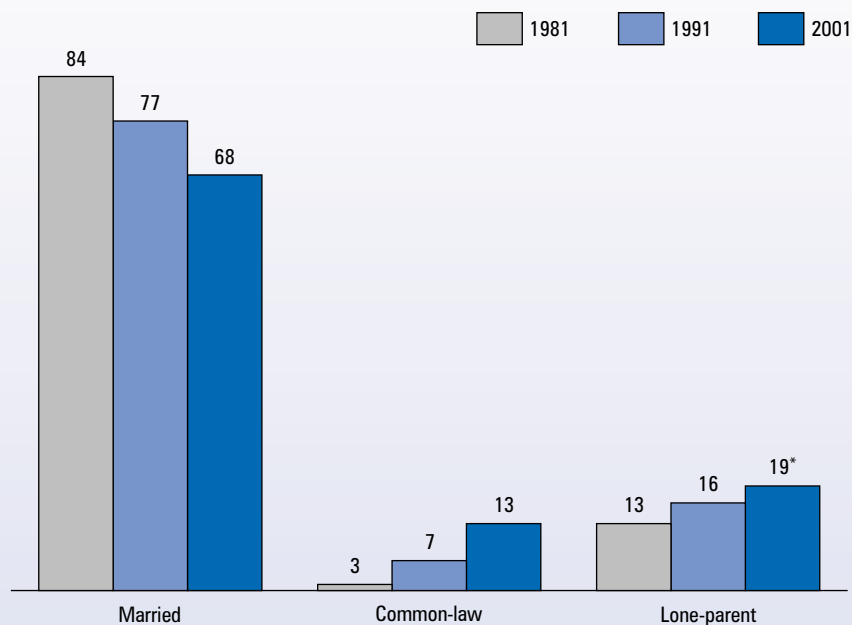
those aged 55 years or older. Common-law unions continue to be less stable than marriages. According to the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS), women whose first union was common-law were twice as likely to experience a separation as those whose first union was marriage.¹

More children living in common-law and lone-parent families than before

It has become more acceptable to bring up children in common-law relationships, although childbearing is still more common in marriages. In 2001, 46% of common-law families included children, whether born in the current union or in a previous relationship. In 1981, this percentage was 34%. In terms of children, about 13% of those under the age of 15 lived in a common-law family in 2001, compared with 3% in 1981. This national average, however, masks large differences between the provinces. While in

1. Statistics Canada. 2002. *Changing Conjugal Life in Canada* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-576-XIE). p. 6.

% of children aged 0-14



* Includes about 1% of children with other living arrangements.
Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

Quebec, 29% of children under age 15 lived with common-law parents, only 8% of children in the rest of Canada had this living arrangement.

According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, children are experiencing parental separation at increasingly younger ages. Furthermore children born into common-law unions are more apt to see the separation of their parents. Research suggests that children who experience the separation or divorce of their parents during their childhood are more likely to separate themselves later in their adult lives.²

In 2001, about 19% of children did not live with both parents. Most of these children lived with a lone parent, the majority of whom were lone mothers. Only about 1% of children under age 15 lived with neither parent — these children usually stayed with other relatives.

Households becoming smaller

Canadian households continue to shrink as fewer people live in large households and more people live alone. In 2001, the average household size fell to 2.6 from 2.9 in 1981. One and two-person households have increased in the last two decades. By 2001, 13% of the population aged 15 and over lived alone compared with 9% in 1981.

Seniors more likely to live alone and less likely to live in health care institutions

In 2001, most senior men (61%) and about one-third (35%) of senior women lived with a spouse or partner and no children, little change from two decades earlier. The percentage of seniors residing with their adult children remained unchanged for men at 13%, but increased for women to 12% in 2001 from 9% in 1981.

Seniors were also more likely to live alone. In 2001, 35% of senior women and 16% of men aged 65 and over lived alone compared with 32% of women and 13% of men in 1981.

The percentage of seniors living in health care institutions has decreased to 9% in 2001 from 10% in 1981 for senior women and to 5% from 7% of senior men over the same time period.

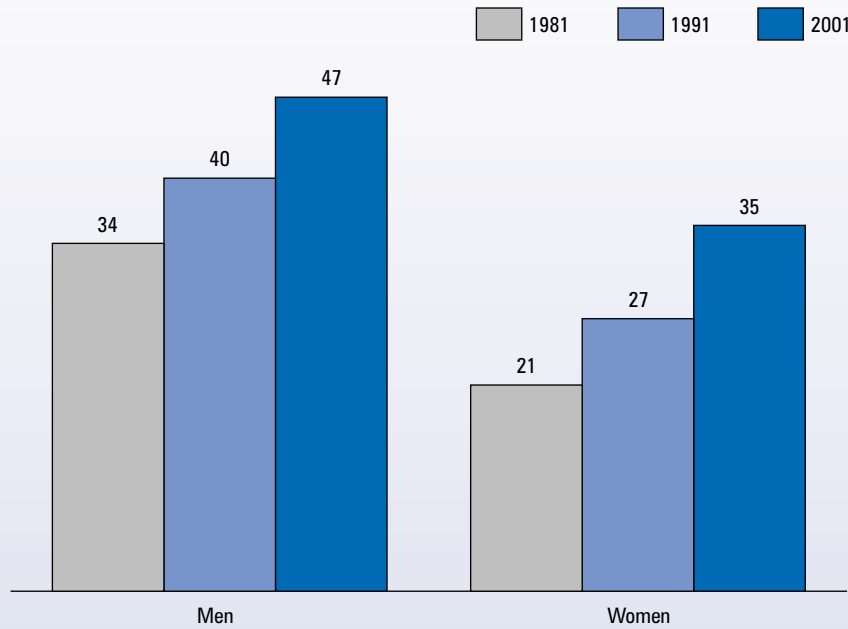
Young adults living with their parents

The new economy, with its intensified competition and rapid technological advances, has increased the need for higher skill levels and more education. More schooling, falling marriage rates, rising age at first marriage and the growth of common-law unions (which are more likely to dissolve than marriages) have extended the period during which young adults live with their parents. Young adults are increasingly remaining in or returning to the parental home. In 2001, 41% of 20- to 29-year-olds lived with their parents, a large increase from 27% in 1981. Young men in their early twenties are the most likely to live at home, with 64% doing so, compared with 52% of young women aged 20 to 24.

The fact that young adults continue to live with their parents has contributed to the decline in unions (marriage or common-law) among young adults. While the percentage of young adults in common-law unions has increased over the past 20 years, the percentage in marriages has declined by more, resulting in fewer unions among people in their twenties. In 2001, 35% of 20- to 29-year-olds were in a marriage or in a common-law

2. Statistics Canada. 2002. *Profile of Canadian Families and Households: Diversification Continues* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 96F0030XIE2001 003). p. 7.

% of 20- to 29-year-olds who live with their parents



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

union compared with 52% in 1981. Men in this age group are less likely to be married or in a common-law union than women.

Stepfamilies³

Many couples in new marriages or common-law unions have children from previous relationships. In 1998-99, nearly 7% of Canadian children under the age of 15 were living in a stepfamily.⁴ Most of these children were part of a blended family,⁵ which most often included the couple's biological children and the wife's children from a previous relationship.

Summary

The Canadian family is continuing to be reshaped. More and more people are in common-law unions or form a lone-parent family. Children are increasingly being raised in these two types of families. The traditional

family, although the single largest group, has declined in popularity from two decades ago. Family trends in the 21st century will continue to evolve. Stay posted.

3. Stepfamilies refer to families in which at least one child is from a previous relationship of one of the parents.
4. National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1998-99.
5. Blended families contain children of both spouses from one or more previous unions, or one or more children from the current union and one or more children from previous unions.

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