

Couples living apart

by Anne Milan and Alice Peters



Most people want to share an intimate connection with another person but the framework within which relationships occur has changed dramatically. Traditionally, marriage was the only acceptable social institution for couples. In recent decades, however, people have been marrying at increasingly older ages, divorce and separation rates have grown, and living together without marriage has become more common. Now it is not unusual for relationships to form and dissolve and new partnerships to be created over the course of the life cycle.

Previously, social norms prescribed that a couple should marry and live in the same household. When a couple could not live together, it was assumed that the living

arrangement was not ideal and was only temporary.¹ In today's society, unmarried couples who live in separate residences while maintaining an intimate relationship are referred to as non-resident partners or "living apart together" (LAT) couples. This type of relationship may be seen as part of the "going steady" process, often as a prelude to a common-law union or marriage. Alternatively, LAT unions may be viewed as a more permanent

1. Levin, I. and J. Trost. 1999. "Living apart together." *Community, Work and Family* 2, 3: 279-94.

living arrangement by individuals who do not want, or are not able, to share a home. This article uses data from the 2001 General Social Survey to examine the characteristics of individuals in LAT relationships.

One in 12 Canadians “lives apart together”

In 2001, 8% of the Canadian population aged 20 and over were in LAT relationships. LAT arrangements were most common for 20- to 29-year-olds (56%). It is not surprising that many of those in LAT couples are young adults. Individuals are postponing union formation until later than did earlier generations due to uncertain job prospects, the pursuit of higher education, and the “crowded nest” phenomenon,² where adult children return to (or never leave) the parental home. While most young adults eventually enter a union,³ being part of a LAT arrangement may meet their immediate relationship needs.

LATs are not just for the young

While the majority of those in LAT relationships were young adults, in 2001 44% of people in such unions were aged 30 and over. About one in five (19%) of those in LAT arrangements were in their thirties, 14% were in their forties and the remaining 11% were aged 50 and over. For older individuals, a LAT arrangement may be a way for them to keep their own households and still have a relationship.

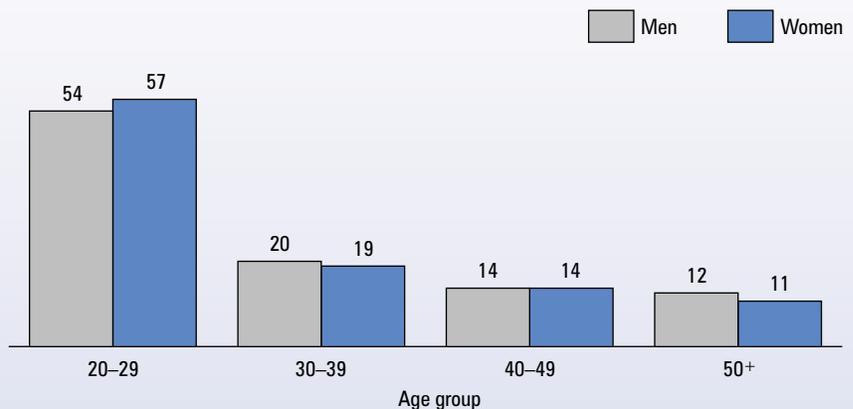
Cultural and family expectations affect perceptions of whether it is appropriate for older individuals to marry again after divorce or widowhood. Previous research has found that many older people do not wish to marry their dating partners.⁴ Some believe that maintaining their own homes prevents an unequal division of domestic labour and caregiving while allowing them to retain their independence. Others view their home

CST What you should know about this study

Data in this article come from the 2001 General Social Survey. The survey interviewed a representative sample of over 24,000 Canadians aged 15 years and older, living in private households in the 10 provinces. This particular study is based on a sample of about 2,190 individuals aged 20 and over who were not living with a spouse (married or common-law) at the time of the survey. These respondents were asked, “Are you in an intimate relationship with someone who lives in a separate household?” It is not possible to determine the duration of this type of relationship.

CST Most of those in living apart together (LAT) arrangements are young people

% in LAT arrangements



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

as a physical or symbolic base from which to carry out their various social activities with friends, adult children, or grandchildren. In all of these situations, a LAT arrangement could be an alternative to remarriage or cohabitation for seniors. Adults entering their middle years and beyond in the early decades of the 21st century will have experienced a greater diversity of relationship and marital experiences over their lifetimes than did earlier generations.⁵ This may result in an increased share of LAT relationships among older adults in the future.

2. See, for example, Boyd, M. and D. Norris. Spring 1999. “The crowded nest: Young adults at home.” *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 2-5.
3. Statistics Canada. 2002. *Changing Conjugal Life in Canada* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-576-XIE).
4. Caradec, V. 1997. “Forms of conjugal life among the ‘young elderly.’” *Population: An English Selection* 9: 47-73.
5. Cooney, T. and K. Dunne. 2001. “Intimate relationships in later life, current realities, future prospects.” *Journal of Family Issues* 22, 7: 838-858.

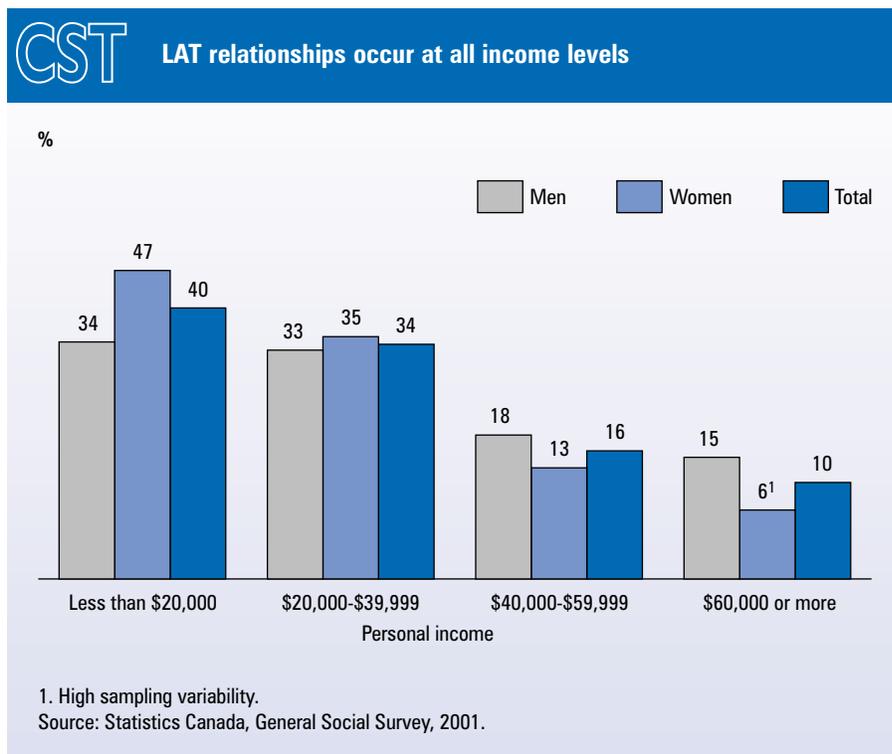
Most people in LATs are in the labour force

The main activity of the majority of LATs aged 30 or more in the year prior to the survey was either working or looking for work. For those aged 30 to 39, 87% were in the labour force, as were 90% of those in their forties. A large share of individuals in their twenties who were in LAT relationships were also in the labour force (62%), while 33% were students. For those individuals aged 50 and older, 54% were in the labour force while 36% were retired.

Given that two households are more expensive to maintain than one, it might be expected that LAT relationships occur more often among those who are financially secure. In some cases, however, there may be social subsidies or income transfers supporting lower income people who do not live with partners, such as widowed seniors or those who have young children. Although it was more pronounced at the lower end of the scale, people at all levels of income were involved in LAT relationships in 2001: 40% had personal incomes below \$20,000, 34% between \$20,000 and \$40,000, 16% between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and 10% had personal incomes greater than \$60,000. This reflects the large proportion of LATs in their twenties who may be either students or who have not been in the labour force for a very long period of time.

Caring for others is a common reason for not living with a partner

One reason why LAT couples do not share a residence is because they are responsible for the care of other persons.⁶ For example, one or both members of the couple may have children. Not wishing to bring another adult into the household because of the children or having difficulty attracting a live-in partner could be compelling reasons for a LAT relationship. Women are more likely to be



lone parents or to retain custody of children following a union dissolution.⁷ In 2001, 23% of women in LAT relationships lived in a household with children, while only 5% of men did so.

Living with and/or having the responsibility of caring for an aging parent could be another reason for a couple to not co-reside. In 2001, 36% of those in LAT relationships lived with a parent or parents (38% of men and 34% of women). While many young adults might live with their parents in order to save expenses, older individuals who share a home with their parents are likely providing some form of parental care. An earlier study found that the responsibility for eldercare has shifted from institutions to families. In 1996, 2.1 million Canadians looked after older family members; two-thirds were between the ages of 30 and 59.⁸

According to one study, two-thirds (66%) of members in LAT couples claim their living separately is due to external pressures, usually family- or work-related; 34% report it is in order

to retain their independence.⁹ In these cases, a LAT relationship is a viable alternative to bringing another person into the household. These individuals may prefer to stay in familiar surroundings, continue their responsibilities for children or parents, or work, all while maintaining an intimate relationship.

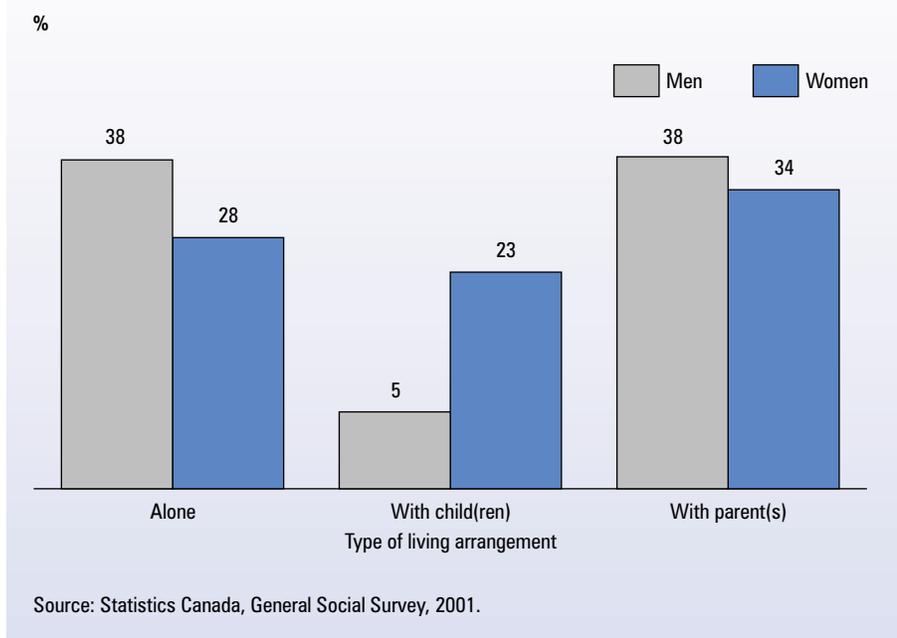
Although many LATs share a home with other family members, overall, roughly one-third lived alone (28% of women and 38% of men), and the proportion increased with age. In

6. Levin and Trost.

7. Statistics Canada. 2002. *Family History* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-575-XIE); Statistics Canada. 2002. *Divorces* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 84F0213XPB).

8. Frederick, J.A. and J.E. Fast. Autumn 1999. "Eldercare in Canada: Who gives how much?" *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 26-30.

9. Villeneuve-Gokalp, C. September/October 1997. "Vivre en couple chacun chez soi." *Population* 5: 1050-1082.



2001, about 16% of 20- to 29-year-old men and women in LAT relationships lived alone, with the proportion rising to 79% of men and 72% of women aged 50 and over. Establishing new living arrangements can be stressful for seniors (for example, following widowhood¹⁰). Furthermore, for a couple to move in together requires decisions about where to live and what possessions to keep or share.¹¹

Many LATs would like to live common-law

About one-half of those in a LAT couple, regardless of whether they are men or women, expect to live common-law with their current partners at some future point. The remainder either do not want their relationship to develop further, or else they are undecided. Age also has an impact on the extent to which people in LAT relationships expect to live common-law. While 57% of those aged 20 to 29 in LAT relationships anticipate that their relationship will develop further, the proportion decreases for those aged 30 to 39 (46%), and 40 to 49

(48%), and drops off to 26% for those 50 and older. This is consistent with the finding that older individuals may be more set in their ways and prefer to maintain their own residences while engaging in a relationship.¹²

The expectation of living common-law with their LAT partner also depends on living arrangements. Approximately one-half of females in LAT relationships who were either living in households with children, or with their parent(s), thought they would live in a common-law union at some point with their current LAT partner. A British study found that one-third of never-married, childless women under 35 are in LAT relationships, and about 30% of those women do not plan to live together or get married to their present partner.¹³ The greater participation of women in the labour force and their subsequent financial autonomy may reflect a reduced willingness to commit to a union that could infringe on their existing relationships with family, friends or other social networks. However, only 32%¹⁴ of males in LAT relationships who were living in households with

children thought they would live in a common-law union with their current partner, compared to 60% of males who lived with their parent(s).

LAT relationships are not necessarily “till death do us part”

Those in LAT relationships held somewhat different views on the importance of a lasting relationship than did those who were married or in common-law unions. The proportion of women in LAT relationships, for example, who felt that it is very important to have a lasting relationship for a happy life was lower (62%) than that of women who were living common-law (72%) and women who were married (81%). The results were similar for men: 53% in LAT relationships believed it was very important to have a lasting relationship compared to 64% of men living common-law and 76% of married men. Perhaps not surprisingly, persons who were divorced or separated were least likely to believe that it was very important to have a lasting relationship in order to be happy (34% of women and 39% of men).

Those in LAT relationships were also less likely to feel that it is very important to have at least one child for a happy life than were people in other types of relationships. Only never-married men (25%) and women (29%) were less inclined than those in LAT relationships to believe that having children is very important in

10. Bess, I. Summer 1999. “Widows living alone.” *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 2-5.

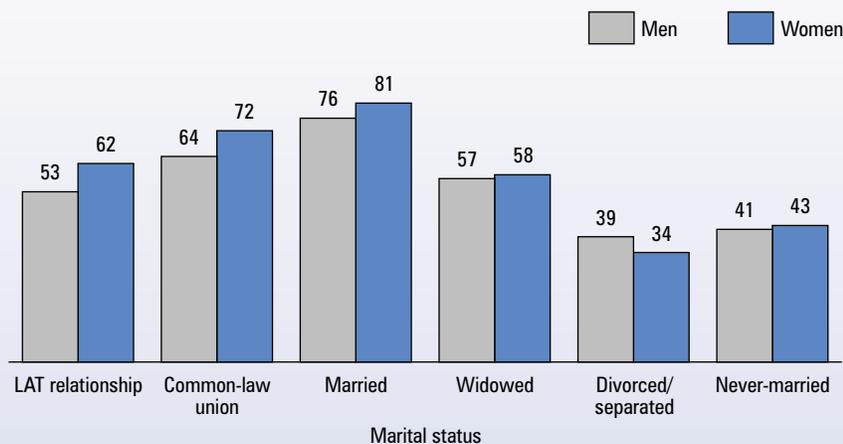
11. Levin and Trost.

12. Caradec.

13. Ermisch, J.F. 2000. *Personal Relationships and Marriage Expectations: Evidence from the 1998 British Household Panel Study*. Colchester, England: Institute for Social and Economic Research.

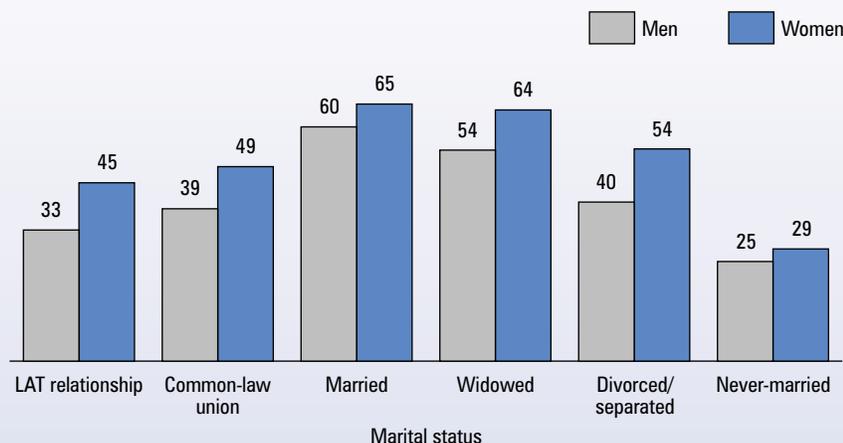
14. High sampling variability.

% who believe it is very important to have a lasting relationship



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

% who believe it is very important to have children



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

order to be happy in life. The proportion of women in LAT relationships, for example, who felt that it is very important to have children was lower (45%) than that of women who were living common-law (49%) and women who were married (65%). The results were similar for men: 33% in LAT relationships believed it was very

important to have a child compared to 39% of men living common-law and 60% of married men.

Summary

Being in an intimate relationship with someone from a separate household may be seen as part of the “going steady” process for the young and

never-married. However, older and previously married individuals are also involved in this type of relationship. Labour market changes, higher educational attainment, changing family responsibilities and living arrangements, increased divorce and separation rates, higher standards of living, and higher life expectancy all may contribute to the prevalence of LAT relationships.

For some, being in an intimate relationship with someone from a separate household is a way of respecting the autonomy of each. Living apart could also allow both parties the time to be sure of their commitment to the relationship before proceeding further.¹⁵ Others may have had the experience of living previously in a “traditional” couple, and they now wish to try an alternative arrangement with a new partner. For yet others who care for children or elderly parents, or have educational or employment commitments in different locations, separate homes may be a practical solution while still engaging in a relationship. Regardless of whether it is a temporary or permanent arrangement, “living apart together” is a way for Canadians to balance their needs for independence with their needs for intimacy.

15. Bawin-Legrow, B. and A. Gauthier. 2001. “Regulation of intimacy and love semantics in couples living apart together.” *International Review of Sociology* 11, 1: 39-46.