

# Mixed unions

by Anne Milan and Brian Hamm

In Canada, most people marry or live common-law with individuals from the same cultural group. However, with the growing diversity of Canada, an increased number of relationships involve individuals from different groups. Mixed unions between non-visible minorities and visible minorities or between two different visible minorities may be seen as an outcome of multiculturalism, which emphasizes the acceptance and interaction of all persons within a society. Mixed unions can be seen as “an engine of social change”<sup>1</sup> by fostering positive attitudes toward visible minority groups, and by linking the social and family networks of the two partners.<sup>2</sup>

This article uses data from the 2001 and 1991 Censuses of Population to examine the prevalence of mixed unions in Canada and to answer several questions related to mixed unions. Are particular visible minority groups more likely to form mixed couples? Does age, educational level, place of birth, or residence in large urban areas affect who is more likely to be in such a relationship? Are mixed unions more apt to be marriages or common-law relationships, and are these unions more or less likely to have children present? Are mixed unions as prevalent in Canada as they are in the United States?

## Over 3% of Canadians are in mixed unions

Of the 14.1 million persons in couples in 2001, 452,000 people were in mixed unions (marriages and common-law

CST

## What you should know about this study

Data in this article are drawn from the 1991 and 2001 Censuses. Mixed unions could refer to couples involving partners from different ethnic origins, religions, visible minority groups or some other characteristic. In this article, mixed couples include one member of a visible minority and one member of a non-visible minority, as well as couples comprised of two different visible minorities. Visible minorities are defined by the *Employment Equity Act* as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour”. “Person-level” data were used to obtain information on characteristics of individuals in mixed unions, such as age, educational level, and immigrant status. In addition, “couple-level” data included such information as whether the union was a marriage or common-law relationship, the extent of pairings within a particular visible minority group, and whether mixed couples had children present in their home.

unions) comprised of one visible minority and one non-visible minority or two different visible minority group members. This was up 35% from 1991, compared with an increase of 10% for all persons in couples. In 2001, mixed unions represented 3.2% of all persons in couples in Canada.<sup>3</sup> Mixed couples could be increasing for many reasons. In general, there is more societal acceptance of non-traditional behaviours, such as same-sex or opposite-sex common-law unions. Social and geographical mobility creates more opportunities to meet and develop relationships with people from a variety of backgrounds. Interaction with many different people can occur at school, work, through

family and friends, or other social networks. There is also greater cultural diversity in Canada than ever before. Indeed, in 2001, there were more visible minority persons in Canada than at any time in the past, creating a larger pool of potential mates. There

1. Goldstein, J.R. 1999. “Kinship networks that cross racial lines: the exception or the rule?” *Demography* 36, 3: 399-407.
2. Kalmijn, M. 1998. “Intermarriage and homogamy: Causes, patterns, trends.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 395-421.
3. In 2001, 86% of persons in couples were those in which both individuals were non-visible minorities, and an additional 10% of persons in couples were comprised of two people from the same visible minority group.

were 4.0 million visible minorities in 2001, or over 13% of the population.<sup>4</sup> This was up from 1.1 million in 1981, when they accounted for less than 5% of the population. Consequently, a more pluralistic society may decrease social distance between persons of different origins and produce more mixed unions.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the most common type of mixed marriage or common-law union in Canada was between a visible minority person and someone who was not a visible minority. There were 394,300 people in such couples in 2001, accounting for 2.8% of all persons in couples, up from 2.4% in 1991. In 2001, of these couples, just over half (53%) included a non-visible minority man with a visible minority woman, while 47% involved a visible minority man and a non-visible minority woman. Among mixed couples, it was more common for a non-visible minority woman to be paired with a South Asian, Arab/West Asian, or Black man, while it was more likely for a non-visible minority man to be partnered with a woman who was Chinese, Filipino, Latin American, Japanese, Korean, or Southeast Asian.

Couples may also be comprised of individuals from two different visible minority groups, although this pairing occurred less frequently. There were 57,700 individuals in such couples (0.4% of all people in couples) in Canada in 2001, up from 34,000 a decade earlier (or 0.3% of all persons in couples). Of all mixed visible minority couples, Chinese-Southeast Asian pairings were the most frequent combination followed by Chinese-Filipino. However, there is much variation in the extent to which different visible minority groups form unions outside of their group.

#### Japanese most likely to partner outside their group

Japanese were the most likely visible minority group to marry or live common-law with a non-Japanese person. Although there were only 25,100 couples in Canada in 2001 which included at least one Japanese person, 70% of these pairings also included a non-Japanese partner. The long Canadian heritage of many Japanese may partially explain why they have the highest proportion of mixed unions. In 2001, almost two-thirds (65%) of Japanese were born in Canada. Previous

research found that mixed unions of immigrant groups may increase with subsequent generations, as adaptation to the host country may be easier for them.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the small number of Japanese in Canada might increase the level of contact with non-Japanese individuals.

The second and third most common groups to be in mixed unions were Latin Americans, followed closely by Blacks. Of the 57,800 couples involving Latin Americans, 45% were mixed unions, or 0.4% of all couples. One possible explanation is that Latin Americans are less likely to live in Latin American neighbourhoods within large cities compared to some other visible minority groups such as Chinese or South Asians. Consequently, Latin Americans may have more interaction outside of their group.<sup>7</sup>

About 43% of couples that included at least one Black person were mixed, which accounted for 0.7% of all couples in Canada. In terms of absolute numbers, Blacks had the largest number of mixed unions (50,400 out of 117,800 couples

Selected visible minority groups	Total couples	Partners within the same visible minority group	Mixed unions
	Number	% of couples	
Japanese	25,100	30	70
Latin American	57,800	55	45
Black	117,800	57	43
Filipino	78,700	67	33
Southeast Asian	45,200	74	26
Arab/West Asian	73,800	76	24
Korean	24,800	82	18
Chinese	265,600	84	16
South Asian	232,000	87	13

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

4. Statistics Canada. 2003. *Canada's Ethno-cultural Portrait: The Changing Mosaic* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 96F0030 XIE2001008).
5. Tzeng, J.M. 2000. "Ethnically heterogeneous marriages: the case of Asian Canadians." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 31, 3: 321-337.
6. Lieberman, S. and M.C. Waters. 1988. *From Many Strands: Ethnic and Racial Groups in Contemporary America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
7. According to the 2001 Census, the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA) has the largest Latin American visible minority population in Canada. Only 13% of the Latin American visible minorities live in neighbourhoods where 10% or more of the neighbourhood is Latin American. In contrast, over 70% of Chinese and South Asian visible minorities in Toronto live in neighbourhoods where at least 10% of the population in their neighbourhood is from their visible minority group. Latin American visible minorities are even less concentrated in other CMAs.

involving Blacks). Similar to the Japanese, many Blacks have a long history in Canada; close to half (45%) of Blacks were Canadian-born. Other visible minority populations had more moderate proportions of unions outside of their groups: Filipinos (33%), Southeast Asians (26%), Arab/West Asians (24%), and Koreans (18%).

### Chinese and South Asians least likely to form mixed unions

Among the least likely to partner outside of their group were South Asians (13%) and Chinese (16%). There were 29,100 mixed South Asian couples in 2001, or 0.4% of all couples.

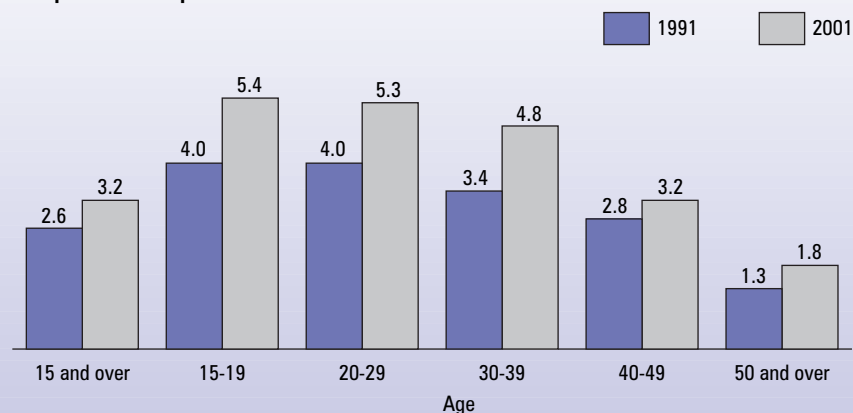
Because Chinese are the largest visible minority group — now over one million people — even a lower probability of forming relationships outside their group still results in a high number of mixed Chinese couples (41,600 couples,<sup>8</sup> representing 0.6% of all couples in the country). The number of mixed couples comprised of a Chinese person paired with a non-Chinese visible minority was also high. There were 10,500 such couples in 2001, representing 0.1% of all couples. The growing number of Chinese in Canada may contribute to an increased number of mixed unions in the future.

### Young urban dwellers most commonly in mixed unions

Becoming part of a couple, either through marriage or a common-law union, remains an important process for men and women in their twenties. Despite the increase in the proportion of young adults living common-law, there has been an overall decrease in 20- to 29-year-olds living in couples during the last two decades.<sup>9</sup> Even though there are fewer young adults in unions, they are more likely to be in mixed unions than are older adults. While more than 5% of men and women in couples in their twenties were in a mixed union in 2001, this was true for only 1% of those in couples aged 65 and

## CST Young people are more likely to be in mixed unions than older adults

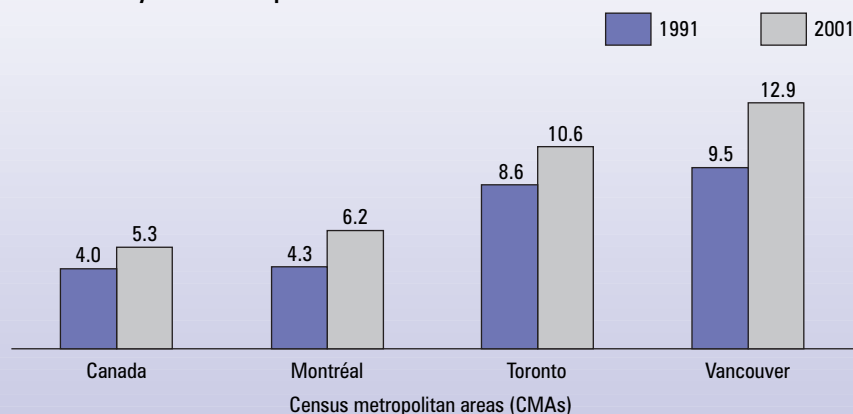
% of persons in couples who are in mixed unions



Source: Statistics Canada, censuses of population.

## CST Young Vancouver adults are more likely to be in mixed unions than young adults in other CMAs

% of 20- to 29-year-olds in couples who are in mixed unions



Source: Statistics Canada, censuses of population.

over. Younger people, in general, tend to be more receptive to behaviours and attitudes that extend the boundaries of social norms, such as living common-law.<sup>10</sup> Another interpretation is that many older people would have married or established relationships at a time when there were fewer visible minority group members living in Canada and, therefore, there were fewer visible minorities available as potential mates.

Greater acceptance of diversity might also explain why persons in

8. Includes 31,200 couples where one partner is Chinese and the other is not a visible minority and 10,500 couples where one partner is Chinese and the other is another visible minority.

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

10. Statistics Canada. 2002b. *Changing Conjugal Life in Canada* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-576-XIE).

mixed couples are more likely to live in large urban areas. Big cities provide more opportunities to meet others from a variety of backgrounds. In addition, visible minority groups are more commonly found in larger cities, increasing the likelihood of forming a relationship with someone from a different group. Mixed unions accounted for 7% of persons in couples in Vancouver, 6% in Toronto, and 3% in Montréal. Among the 20- to 29-year-olds in couples, the proportions are even higher in Vancouver (13%), Toronto (11%) and Montréal (6%).

### Persons in mixed unions likely to have higher education and be foreign-born

According to the 2001 Census, about seven out of every 10 individuals who were visible minorities were born outside of Canada. Since the 1960s, an emphasis on the economic criteria for admitting immigrants means that many foreign-born persons are highly educated. Consequently, visible minority group members in couples also tend to have higher than average levels of education. About 28% of visible minorities in unions with a partner from the same visible minority group had a university degree, as did 31% of persons in mixed unions, and 18% of all persons in couples. Similar proportions of persons in same-group visible minority couples (27%) and the overall population in couples had less than high school, while this was true for only 13% of persons in mixed couples. With rising educational levels and higher social mobility, achieved characteristics in the form of socio-economic resources may become more significant than visible minority status or ethnicity when choosing a partner.<sup>11</sup>

More highly educated persons may have higher tolerance for differences, as well as a more universal outlook than persons with lower levels of education.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, ascribed characteristics, that is, attributes a

person is born with, such as skin colour, become less important in mate selection, as educational levels increase. Nearly four times as many people with university degrees were in mixed unions (5.6%) compared to those individuals with high school or less (1.5%). This difference in the prevalence of mixed unions by education levels is also age-related, as university degree-holders tend to be younger than those with high school or less and visible minorities are younger and more highly educated than the Canadian-born population.

Pursuing postsecondary education might provide exposure to an environment where individuals meet others from many cultures. In addition, having a higher education might open a

person to more situations where there could be contact with people from a variety of backgrounds.

In 2001, close to 7% of the foreign-born in unions were in a mixed union while this was true for only 2% of the Canadian-born. This likely reflects the high proportion of visible minority persons who are foreign-born compared to the overall population. Couples involving foreign-born persons tend to differ from the average in other respects as well — for example, they are more likely to be in age-discrepant marriages.<sup>13</sup> Marriages comprised of much older men and younger women may reflect the attitudes and behaviours found in their countries of origin.

Interestingly, Canadian-born visible minorities were more likely to be

Age	Mixed unions		
	Total	Two different visible minorities	One visible minority and one non-visible minority
	% of people in unions who are in mixed couples		
15 and over	3.2	0.4	2.8
15 to 19	5.4	0.7	4.6
20 to 29	5.3	0.6	4.6
30 to 44	4.3	0.6	3.8
45 to 64	2.5	0.3	2.2
65 and over	1.0	0.1	0.9
<b>Education</b>			
Less than high school	1.5	0.2	1.3
High school	2.3	0.3	2.0
Some postsecondary	3.6	0.5	3.1
University degree	5.6	0.7	5.0
<b>Place of birth</b>			
Canadian-born	2.1	0.1	2.0
Foreign-born	6.7	1.5	5.2

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001.

11. Tzeng. 2000.

12. Kalmijn. 1998.

13. Boyd, M. and A. Li. Autumn 2003. "May-December: Canadians in age-discrepant marriages." *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 29-33.

in mixed unions than in unions with their same visible minority. In contrast, foreign-born visible minorities were far more likely to be in same visible minority unions than in mixed unions. In 2001, 8% of all visible minorities aged 15 and over in couples were in mixed unions, compared with 14% of Canadian-born visible minorities. The longer foreign-born visible minorities stayed in Canada, the more likely they were to be in mixed unions. Only 5% of visible minorities who arrived in Canada in the 1990s were in mixed unions, while 17% of those who arrived during the 1960s were in such unions.

#### **Mixed unions more frequent for common-law unions than marriages**

Overall, mixed unions are more likely to be common-law relationships than marriages. This is probably age-related as common-law unions are more prevalent among young people,<sup>14</sup> and visible minorities also have a younger age profile than the overall population. There may be a perception that common-law unions are temporary or involve less commitment than a marriage. In Canada, 4.0% of all common-law unions were mixed in 2001, compared with 2.9% of all marriages. For the overall population in couples in 2001, 16% lived in common-law unions, as did 22% for couples involving a non-visible minority and a visible minority, and 13% when the couple consisted of two different visible minorities.

#### **Children slightly more likely to be in mixed unions**

It cannot be determined with census data whether the children were born to mixed parents, only that they were present at the time of the census. In 2001, 3.3% of all couples with children were mixed unions while 2.8% of unions without children present were mixed. This difference is partly due to mixed couples being younger

than other couples and therefore more likely to have children.

In 2001, more mixed couples in Canada had children (60%) than not. In comparison, 57% of all couples had children. This proportion was slightly higher for couples in mixed visible/non-visible minority unions (59%), and much higher for couples comprised of two different visible minorities (69%). However, it may also be that visible minority groups have higher fertility in comparison to the total population. For example, over 77% of all couples involving Arabs and West Asians have children. Over four-fifths (82%) of couples in which both partners are Arab or West Asian have children. Yet, there is still a higher likelihood of mixed Arab or West Asian couples having children at home (64%) than for the overall population in couples.

#### **Proportion of mixed unions higher in Canada than in the United States**

International comparisons are difficult due to differences in the way visible minority groups and mixed unions are defined. However, data from the United States suggests that some of the mixed union patterns differ from those found in Canada. In the United States in 2000, 2.0% of all couples (married and common-law) were mixed, lower than the proportion in Canada in 2001 (3.1%). The most common American mixed couples were Whites paired with Asians or Pacific Islanders, which represented 1.2% of all couples. In addition, Whites and Blacks accounted for 0.7% of all couples (the same proportion as Canada). Also parallel to the Canadian experience, common-law relationships in the United States were more likely to be mixed relationships (4.3% of all common-law unions) than marriages (1.9%).<sup>15</sup>

#### **Summary**

Most people marry or live common-law with individuals from the same

cultural group. Although relatively rare, some relationships involve individuals from different groups. Overall, mixed unions are still a low percentage of the total unions in Canada, but they have increased over the last decade. This suggests that the social norms governing appropriate relationship partners are malleable and can change over time as attitudes evolve.

Persons engaged in these types of unions tend to be younger, live in large urban areas, have a higher education, and are foreign-born. Mixed couples are also more likely than non-mixed couples to live common-law and to have children present. High rates of immigration and the greater interaction between groups may encourage mixed unions, which, in turn, may increase the pool of potential mates who identify with multiple groups.

---

14. Statistics Canada. 2002b.

15. Fields, J. and L.M. Casper. 2001. "America's families and living arrangements." *Current Population Reports*. P20-537. Washington, DC: US Census Bureau.



**Anne Milan** is an analyst with *Canadian Social Trends* and **Brian Hamm** is a senior technical officer with Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division, Statistics Canada.