

When is junior moving out? Transitions from the parental home to independence

by Pascale Beaupré, Pierre Turcotte and Anne Milan

Children obtain most of their early socialization at home with their parents, where they acquire the experiences and ideas that will influence their adult years.¹ Consequently, leaving the parental home is a significant event for both parents and children. For the parents, it may represent relief, pride in having fulfilled their parental role, and joy at seeing their children move towards greater independence. For the children, the first departure is a symbolic marker as they make the transition from youth to adulthood.

However, there has been a substantial increase in children still living at home long past the age when their parents expected them to leave. The largest growth has occurred among young adults in their late 20s or early 30s: between 1981 and 2001, the proportions doubled from 12% to 24% for those aged 25 to 29 and from 5% to 11% for those aged 30 to 34.²

Most of this increase took place during the early 1980s and early 1990s, years during which Canada endured two of the most severe labour recessions since the 1930s. Given the context, it does seem fair to ask whether young adults are really taking longer to leave the nest than their parents did.

This article uses data from the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine patterns in leaving the parental home. It compares the transition process for five birth cohorts, with the focus on Wave 1 Boomers (born 1947-56) and Generation X (born 1967-76). The differences in patterns of leaving the parental home are examined, and then the principal factors associated with a young person's initial departure from home are identified.

More children staying home longer

According to the 2001 GSS, only 87% of Generation X had left the parental home at least once and (as expected) almost all of Wave 1 had done so. Of course, leaving the parental home does not preclude a child from returning, but the transition of Wave 1s seems relatively smooth compared with Gen Xers. About 14% of Wave 1 Boomers returned home after their first attempt at leaving, while almost one-quarter (22%) of Gen Xers had boomeranged.

Using life-table estimates, it is possible to examine the changes across generations in the timing of children's first departure from the parental home. Younger Wave 1 male

Boomers (born 1952-56) had a 59% probability of leaving by age 21, compared with 46% for younger Generation X males (born 1972-76). On the other hand, older Gen Xers had a higher likelihood of leaving by age 21 than older Wave 1s (born 1947-51), at 53% versus 49%. (Table of cumulative probabilities for all cohorts in Table A.1.)

Women tended to leave home earlier than men, largely because they marry or cohabit at younger ages³, and in this study, this was especially the case for women in the older cohorts. There was a two-thirds probability that both older and younger Wave 1 women had first launched before turning 21; the probability dropped to 59% and then 55% for older and younger Generation X women. (See Table A.1.)

Of course, economic conditions had changed considerably between the time that Wave 1 quit the nest and the time that Gen X was expected to leave. Well-paying unionized jobs were not nearly as plentiful, and real wages for young workers had fallen, reducing the incentive and opportunity for independence. (See "It's a wild world: Changing labour market conditions after the postwar boom").

GST What you should know about this study

This study is based on data from the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) on family history. The GSS interviewed 24,310 individuals aged 15 and over, living in private households in the 10 provinces. One section of the survey collected data on the number of times respondents left the parental home and their age at the time of each of these events. Information about first and last departure allows the process of “launching from home” to be examined for several generations of Canadians. This study is based on individuals aged 15 to 69 in 2001.¹

Five birth cohorts are examined, with the text focusing on Wave 1 Boomers and Generation X:

Generation Y – born between 1977 and 1986, and 15 to 24 years old at the time of the survey;

Generation X – born 1967 to 1976, aged 25 to 34;

Wave 2 Boomers – born 1957 to 1966, aged 35 to 44;

Wave 1 Boomers – born 1947 to 1956, aged 45 to 54; and

War/Depression generation – born 1932 to 1946, aged 55 to 69 at the time of the 2001 GSS.

The process of leaving home is analysed in two steps. First, life-tables are used to calculate the cumulative probabilities that highlight the differences in the intensity and timing of home-leaving between cohorts. Second, event history analysis is used to identify the demographic and socio-economic factors associated with the home-leaving process. These factors are presented as risk ratios. Involuntary departures (such as parental deaths) and all departures before age 15 are excluded from this analysis.

Launch: A child’s first departure from the parental home to live independently. If the child does not return, the launch is described as successful.

Boomerang: A child’s return to the parental home after a period of living independently (usually assumed to be a minimum of four months in many studies).

Risk ratio: Ratio of the estimated probability of an event occurring (e.g., leaving home for the first time) versus the estimated probability of the event occurring for a reference group. For example, if the probability of leaving home for the first time at age 21 was 20% for Wave 1 Baby Boomers and it was 10% for the reference cohort (say, the War/Depression generation) after controlling for all other variables in the model, then the risk ratio would be 2.0. Risk ratios over 1.0 indicate a higher risk associated with that characteristic, compared to the reference group; a risk ratio less than 1.0 indicates a lower risk.

The risk ratios were calculated based on a proportional hazard model using the following explanatory variables: birth cohort; family environment when the respondent was age 15 (family composition, number of siblings, mother’s and father’s main activity, mother’s birthplace); the respondent’s place of residence when he or she was 15 (region/province, size of town/city); and the level of education the respondent had obtained by the time he or she first left the parental home; and the respondent’s employment status at the time of first departure. Separate models were run for men and women.

1. Based on respondents’ interpretation and recollection of the age at which they first left home.

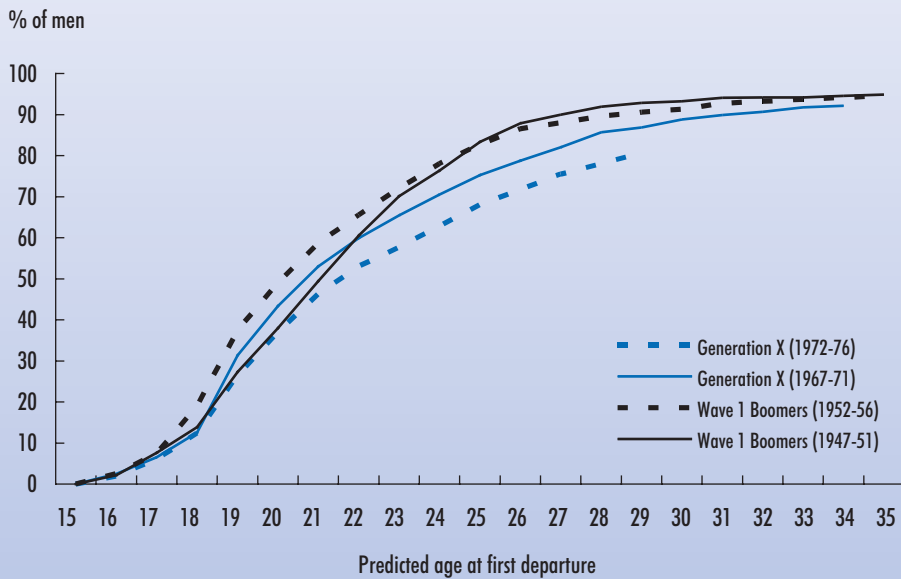
The reasons for leaving the parental home have also changed. Most young adults today move out voluntarily to pursue educational or employment opportunities, or simply live independently of their parents. However, studies have consistently found that children who leave home for these reasons are significantly more likely to boomerang than those who leave to marry and set up their own conjugal household.⁴

Birth cohort a key predictor of leaving home earlier

Researchers have been examining the path to independence for many years, and have identified a number of important influences on the transition from the parental home to independence. A wide variety of factors unique to the individual and the family play a role, of course; on the larger stage, general economic conditions, jobs opportunities, family financial pressures and regional diversity are also linked.⁵

Exactly how old a young person is when he or she first leaves the parental home depends on their unique situation. However, a risk ratio calculated using a proportional hazard model can estimate the probability that a person’s first departure will occur at a younger or older age than a reference individual, when all other factors are controlled for. (See “What you should know about this study” for the list of variables included in the model.)

By age 21, about half of men in Wave 1 and Gen X had left their parents' home for the first time



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

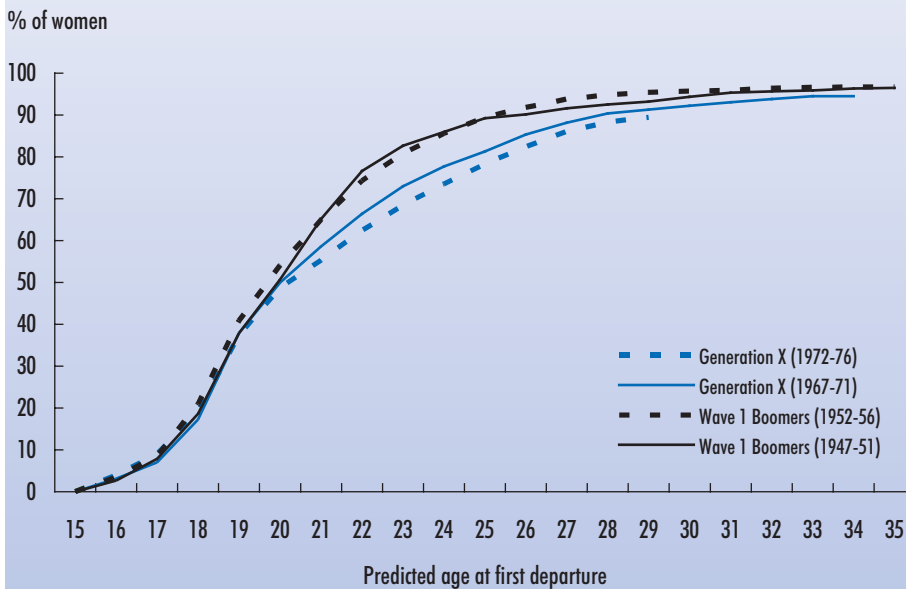
Earning a living is a key step to independence, so the state of the economy plays an important role when a young person is deciding whether to leave home. Reaching adulthood in a good or bad job market is entirely an accident of birth, and it is not surprising that young men from Generation X had a 16% lower probability of an early first departure than men in the War/Depression cohort. Similarly, women had a 12% lower risk of leaving home at a given age if they belonged to Gen X than to the 1932-46 cohort, which reached adulthood during the economic heyday of the 1950s and 1960s, while the younger cohort faced the difficult labour market of the 1990s.

Non-traditional and large families encourage earlier first departure

Children who experience family disruption during their childhood generally leave home earlier, probably as a way to deal with difficult relationships or other problems in the family.⁶ This seems to be especially true of women. When all other variables are controlled for, women who spent at least part of their childhood in a step-family had a 57% higher risk of leaving at a younger age than women who grew up in an intact family (both biological parents present). Men raised in a step-family also had a greater likelihood of leaving home earlier, but the increased risk (30%) was substantially lower than for women from step-families. In short, the presence of a step-parent seems to encourage young adults to leave home at an earlier age.

Generally, young people who leave home before age 18 due to an unstable family situation may not feel they have the option of returning home if they need help. This tends to expose premature leavers to having lower educational attainment, poorer labour market attachment and associated difficulties. In contrast, staying in a stable home environment after age 25 can provide a child with

But over half of women in Wave 1 and in Generation X had left home by age 20



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Respondent characteristics	Men	Women	Respondent characteristics	Men	Women
Risk ratios			Risk ratios		
Birth cohort			Religious attendance at age 15		
<i>War/Depression</i>	1.00	1.00	<i>Weekly</i>	1.00	1.00
Wave 1 Boomers	0.99	1.09	Sometimes	1.06	1.11*
Wave 2 Boomers	0.92*	0.95	Never	1.22*	1.27*
Generation X	0.84*	0.88*	Region of residence at age 15		
Generation Y	0.57*	0.58*	Atlantic	1.10*	1.18*
Family structure while growing up			<i>Quebec</i>	1.00	1.00
<i>Two-parent intact family</i>	1.00	1.00	Ontario	1.15*	1.10*
Step-parent	1.30*	1.57*	Prairies	1.54*	1.64*
Lone-parent	1.16*	1.22*	British Columbia	1.42*	1.50*
Other	1.13	1.69*	Outside Canada	1.09	1.06
Number of siblings			Size of city where respondent lived at age 15		
Only child	0.93	1.01	Less than 5,000	1.44*	1.80*
<i>One sibling</i>	1.00	1.00	5,000 to 24,999	1.36*	1.60*
Two siblings	1.06	1.07	25,000 to 99,999	1.27*	1.39*
Three siblings	1.20*	1.13*	100,000 to 999,999	1.10*	1.17*
Four siblings or more	1.26*	1.22*	1,000,000 or more	1.00	1.00
Main activity of mother when respondent was age 15			Level of schooling when respondent left home		
<i>Mother worked</i>	1.00	1.00	Less than secondary	0.92	1.12*
Did not work	0.88*	0.92*	<i>Had secondary diploma</i>	1.00	1.00
Main activity of father when respondent was age 15			Postsecondary degree, certificate or diploma	1.12*	0.94
<i>Father worked</i>	1.00	1.00	Employment status when respondent left home		
Did not work	1.34	1.32	<i>Did not work</i>	1.00	1.00
Birth place of mother			Did work	1.13*	1.03
<i>Mother born in Canada</i>	1.00	1.00			
Born outside Canada	0.69*	0.77*			

* Statistically significant difference from reference group (shown in italics) at $p < 0.05$.

Note: Risk ratios were generated with a proportional hazard model. Risk ratios over 1.0 indicate a higher risk associated with that characteristic, compared to the reference group; a risk ratio less than 1.0 indicates a lower risk.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

more resources to pursue a higher education or to build up savings, thus building a solid foundation for adult independence.⁷

Growing up in a large family also promotes being independent sooner rather than later. Men with three siblings had a 20% greater chance of moving out compared to someone the same age with only one sibling. Similarly, women had an 13% greater chance. And having four or more brothers or sisters at home increased the probability of leaving home earlier even more.

Parental employment linked to first launch

Having a mother who was not in the paid labour force during their adolescence seems to reduce the likelihood of moving out of the parental home, when all other factors are controlled for. Compared to people the same age whose mothers had worked outside the home, men had a 12% lower and women an 8% lower probability of leaving home if their mothers had not been employed when they were 15. However, the effect of having an unemployed father was not

statistically significant for either young men or women.

Mother's place of birth and the respondent's teenaged religious attendance habits influence home leaving

A young person's cultural background can influence the process of leaving home, and ethnicity and religious observance play significant roles. Researchers have noted that if a family has preserved some of the ethnic norms and preferences of a familistic culture intact, children tend

Economic conditions in Canada have changed substantially since the 1960s and early 1970s when the first wave of the baby boom left home. Many of these changes have effectively slowed the transition from adolescence to adulthood; indeed, in some instances, it is fair to say that they may have changed the definition of adulthood.

After the Second World War, demand for skilled labour increased and enrolment in postsecondary education skyrocketed. By 1971, 46% of the prime working-age population (aged 25 to 54) had more than twelve years of schooling, compared to 10% in 1951. Over the same period, the percentage with a university degree more than doubled from 2% to 5%.

Due in part to the rapidly improving educational levels of the workforce, the 1950s and 1960s produced the biggest earnings gains of the century in real terms – almost 43% and 37%, respectively. This was the job market into which the first wave of the baby boom graduated.

The labour market which greeted the second wave of the baby boom was considerably different. In 1973, the oil crisis catapulted the economy into a period of simultaneous high unemployment and high inflation. In the late 1970s, interest rates were increased sharply to beat down inflation. Economists generally agree that the resulting recession of 1981-82 was the most severe since the Depression.

By 1983, the economy was pulling out of recession and job growth accelerated. However, it became apparent that the position of workers under age 35 was worsening. In the late 1970s, the real earnings of young workers began to fall in Canada and other industrialized nations. Young men bore the brunt of this trend, although young women also experienced relative declines in earnings. So although the mid- to late-1980s are frequently remembered as years of

excessive conspicuous consumption, most young workers were comparatively worse off.

The recession of 1990-92 was not as severe as that 10 years before, but it lasted longer. Downsizing — the permanent elimination of jobs — was significantly higher, the recovery was slower to take hold, there was little full-time job creation until late in the decade, and wages remained flat.

In the 1990s, firms increasingly began to control their costs using non-permanent workers, and Gen X found itself looking for work in a job market that would probably be unrecognizable to their parents. Instead of hiring new employees, firms contracted their work out to other firms and self-employed individuals. This strategy effectively blocks work opportunities for young people, who are usually too inexperienced to successfully bid for contract work. In addition, even though unemployment rates remained above 10%, unemployment insurance regulations were tightened up and the new restrictions fell particularly hard on young people.

However, the 1990s ended with a strong economic recovery. Unemployment levels were lower than they had been for 10 years, income tax rates began to drop and disposable income started to rise faster than inflation.

Throughout these uneasy years, many young people stayed in school to improve their education and skills. But at the same time, postsecondary tuition fees more than doubled and governments offered students less grant assistance. Now more dependent on loans to pay for their studies, Gen Xers were entering the labour market with substantially increased debt loads.

- For more information, see "100 Years of Labour Force", *Canadian Social Trends* 57: 2-14; "100 Years of Education" and "100 Years of Income and Spending", *Canadian Social Trends* 59: 3-12.

to launch at older ages than those with British backgrounds.⁸ According to the GSS, men whose mother was born in a foreign country had a 31% lower probability of moving out early than men whose mother was Canadian-born; the probability for women was 23% lower.

The importance of family and kinship ties to people with strong religious beliefs has been well-documented,⁹ and respondents who often attended religious services in their youth might internalize these values. Certainly, compared with

respondents who had attended services once a week, individuals who had never attended as a teen were more likely to depart at a younger age: the probability was 22% higher for men and 27% higher for women, when all other factors are controlled for.

Westerners more likely to leave home early

Region of residence, especially during childhood, has an effect on patterns of leaving home because it tends to create, support or reinforce social norms. Compared to adults who spent at least part of their childhood in Quebec, people who grew up in any other province had a greater likelihood of launching early. The highest probabilities were recorded in the West: they were 64% greater for women and 54% greater for men who had grown up in the Prairies, and 50% and 42% greater, respectively, if they had lived in British Columbia as a teen. The differences were not as great in Ontario or Atlantic Canada, but the risk ratios were significantly higher compared to Quebec, when all other factors are controlled for.

Smaller towns prompt earlier departures from the nest

People raised in small towns (less than 5,000) had the greatest likelihood of leaving home, compared to those raised in cities with populations over one million. Women, especially, left small towns at a younger age. When all other variables are controlled for, they had an 80% greater probability of an early first departure, while men had a 44% greater likelihood. Even those who grew up in a mid-size city of 25,000 to 100,000 had a higher likelihood of leaving sooner.

Geography influences the cost of housing, job availability and access to higher education. Young adults in a very large city might delay moving out because the cost of setting up an independent household is prohibitive, while those from less urban areas may accelerate their first launch because they can only obtain education, employment or labour market skills in a bigger city.¹⁰

Men with higher education leave sooner

Education is also associated with an earlier first departure. Men who have at least some postsecondary education had a 12% higher chance of leaving the parental home than young men who were the same age but had only high school graduation. For women, the opposite is true; that is, women without high school had a 12% greater probability of leaving home at a younger age than those with secondary completion.

The literature generally suggests that having personal income is an important predictor of leaving home sooner rather than later.¹¹ The risk of leaving home at a younger age was 13% higher for employed than unemployed men whereas there was no statistically significant difference in risk between employed and unemployed young women.

Summary

Leaving the parental home is seen as an important event on the path to adulthood, although young adults today seem to delay leaving the nest. The exact timing of the first departure may be influenced by many factors, such as relationship formation, educational or employment opportunities, or expectations about establishing an independent household.

The GSS shows that those born during the early to mid 1950s left home earlier than later cohorts of young adults. In addition, young adults are more likely to leave home sooner rather than later if they spend at least part of their childhood in a non-traditional family, have more than two siblings, have a Canadian-born mother, did not attend religious

services during adolescence, live in a region outside Quebec and grow up in a smaller town.



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Table A.1 Cumulative probabilities of first leaving home for men and women

Age at first departure	Generation/Age in 2001 at time of survey/Years of birth cohort										
	Generation Y		Generation X		Wave 2 Boomers		Wave 1 Boomers		War/Depression		
	15 to 19	20 to 24	25 to 29	30 to 34	35 to 39	40 to 44	45 to 49	50 to 54	55 to 59	60 to 64	65 to 69
	1982 to 1986	1977 to 1981	1972 to 1976	1967 to 1971	1962 to 1966	1957 to 1961	1952 to 1956	1947 to 1951	1942 to 1946	1937 to 1941	1932 to 1936
Men	probabilities										
15	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
16	0.7	2.3	1.9	2.5	3.2	2.9	2.6	2.2	3.3	3.5	4.8
17	2.7	5.1	6.1	6.5	6.9	7.1	7.5	7.6	10.2	9.6	10.4
18	6.5	10.1	12.4	12.6	16.6	13.5	19.0	13.9	16.4	16.5	21.1
19	11.9	20.4	26.4	31.4	33.4	29.0	37.5	27.3	30.5	27.8	33.4
20	...	28.4	37.1	43.3	44.1	41.1	49.0	38.0	39.5	39.7	39.9
21	...	34.7	46.3	53.0	52.4	51.2	58.6	49.4	51.8	47.4	50.8
22	...	42.2	53.0	60.0	61.1	58.9	65.6	60.5	60.5	55.4	60.5
23	...	48.9	57.7	65.4	69.2	65.0	72.1	70.1	69.8	64.3	67.2
24	...	53.6	62.9	70.5	73.8	71.1	78.1	76.3	74.8	70.5	74.5
25	...	...	68.1	75.2	78.3	75.8	82.8	83.3	79.3	77.0	79.4
26	...	...	71.7	78.8	83.5	80.6	86.5	87.9	85.3	83.9	84.0
27	...	...	75.5	82.1	86.2	83.3	88.0	90.0	87.3	86.9	87.3
28	...	...	78.0	85.7	88.9	86.7	89.5	91.9	89.9	88.8	91.2
29	...	...	80.7	86.9	91.0	88.5	90.6	92.8	91.7	90.2	92.6
30	...	...	...	88.8	91.7	89.4	91.3	93.2	92.8	91.5	93.6
31	...	...	...	89.9	92.4	90.5	92.8	94.1	93.0	93.8	94.6
32	...	...	...	90.7	93.4	91.0	93.2	94.2	93.7	94.5	95.2
33	...	...	...	91.7	94.2	91.3	93.7	94.2	94.5	95.5	96.4
34	...	...	...	92.2	94.5	91.9	94.2	94.6	95.0	96.0	96.6
35	...	...	...	...	94.8	92.2	94.6	94.8	95.1	97.0	96.6
Women	probabilities										
15	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
16	1.6	1.6	4.0	3.1	2.7	2.4	3.4	2.7	3.2	5.4	5.0
17	4.7	5.8	9.0	7.1	9.1	8.0	8.7	7.9	10.0	13.2	12.9
18	10.0	14.8	19.1	17.3	20.4	18.1	20.9	18.7	21.8	21.4	23.6
19	16.8	28.7	37.4	38.0	40.1	37.3	40.9	37.9	40.1	40.4	37.3
20	...	39.5	48.8	50.0	50.7	52.0	54.1	50.8	48.9	54.1	47.9
21	...	48.9	55.2	58.6	58.8	61.5	65.1	65.2	60.4	63.0	58.7
22	...	56.0	62.5	66.5	67.9	72.1	74.3	76.6	71.3	72.5	70.8
23	...	62.0	68.5	73.0	75.4	77.9	80.8	82.6	77.6	79.4	78.9
24	...	64.7	73.5	77.7	80.7	82.1	85.6	86.0	84.3	83.9	84.0
25	...	...	78.3	81.3	84.2	84.9	89.5	89.3	87.4	86.8	88.9
26	...	...	82.4	85.4	88.8	88.4	91.8	90.2	90.4	89.4	91.2
27	...	...	86.1	88.2	90.6	89.8	93.8	91.6	91.7	90.0	92.9
28	...	...	88.3	90.4	92.0	90.7	94.8	92.5	93.5	91.0	93.5
29	...	...	89.5	91.3	93.1	92.2	95.4	93.2	95.0	92.5	94.8
30	...	...	...	92.3	94.4	93.1	95.7	94.4	96.0	92.8	95.5
31	...	...	...	93.1	94.9	94.5	95.9	95.3	96.5	94.8	96.6
32	...	...	...	93.9	95.1	95.2	96.4	95.7	96.6	95.0	97.0
33	...	...	...	94.5	95.4	95.3	96.7	95.9	96.8	95.5	97.2
34	...	...	...	94.5	96.3	95.8	96.7	96.3	97.1	95.9	97.3
35	...	...	...	...	96.3	95.9	96.8	96.5	97.3	96.4	97.4

... not applicable

Source: Statistics Canada, Life tables generated from General Social Survey, 2001.