

Junior comes back home: Trends and predictors of returning to the parental home

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Boomerang *noun* (1) a curved flat hardwood projectile used by Australian Aborigines to kill prey, and often of a kind able to return in flight to the thrower. (2) a plan etc. that backfires. *intransitive verb* (1) act as a boomerang. (2) (of a plan etc.) backfire.¹

Canadians with adult children may be familiar with both meanings of the word “boomerang.” It describes the behaviour of young adults who, after living away from home for a time, return to live with their parents. Although many parents may be unprepared for this “blast from the past”, an adult child returning home has become a fairly common, predictable event in family life.²

Leaving home is often a continuing process in which close ties with the family home are unravelled slowly rather than being cut quickly. Even though the child is living elsewhere, some level of dependence remains, whether it is emotional, financial or functional, or all three.³ In this stage of what researchers have called “semi-autonomous living,” the family home may provide a form of safety net for young adults and a refuge from financial or emotional difficulties.⁴ Consequently, leaving may occur multiple times rather than just once.

Returning home is not usually characterized by tension and discord between the generations.⁵ In fact, parents may appreciate having their adult child’s companionship and help at home, although studies do find that parents’ satisfaction is greater when their adult children are more independent, more mature, and give as well as receive support.⁶

However, a return home does interrupt each party’s plans for the future, and neither parents nor children may know what is expected of them in their new roles. Returning home tends to increase parental responsibility, as mothers are left with additional care giving tasks such as cooking or doing laundry.⁷ Sharing the house again can also produce difficulties caused by interpersonal conflicts or lack of social or practical support.⁸

This paper uses data from the 2001 General Social Survey to examine patterns in the frequency with which young people have returned home over the last few decades, their reasons for returning, and the socio-demographic and economic factors that influence this process.

Returning has become more common with each generation

Returning home in young adulthood has evolved from a relatively rare

to a fairly common event. While a proportion of youngsters have always returned home after first striking out on their own, what we see from a life table analysis is that the tendency to return home at least once has risen in each generation, starting with the boomers. For example, among early Wave 1 Boomers (born 1947-51), the probability of returning home within five years of first leaving was less than 12% for men and 10% for women. In contrast, the probability for the later wave of Gen Xers (born 1972-76) was 32% for men and 28% for women. In other words, for both men and women, the likelihood of coming back home has nearly tripled. (Table A.1)

There are a number of factors that help explain this growing trend. These include the increasing acceptance of common-law relationships (since such unions are more likely to break up than marriages); the pursuit of higher education, which tends to leave young graduates with heavy student debts; financial difficulties; the reduced stigma attached to living with parents; wanting a standard of living impossible to afford on their own; the new and different roles of parents and children in families; and needing a parent’s emotional support during the stressful transition to adulthood and independence.⁹

Factors that increase the risk of return are birth cohort...

Hazard model analysis allows us to estimate the probability that a young adult with certain characteristics will return home to their parents; when this probability is compared to that of a reference group, it produces a risk ratio that identifies whether the characteristic will increase or decrease the likelihood of a young adult moving back into the family home.

This method shows quite clearly that the boomerang phenomenon

began with the female Wave 1 Boomers and accelerated among both sexes in the succeeding cohorts. Compared with women born during the Depression and Second World War (1932-46), and when all other variables in the model are controlled for, Wave 1 Boomer women had a 39% greater likelihood of returning home. By the time Generation X women (born 1967-76) had reached the fledgling stage, their chance of returning home was almost two-and-a-half times higher. Meanwhile, Gen X men's risk of coming back to their

parents' home was over twice as high as that of men from the 1932-46 birth cohort.

...reason for going

The boomerang phenomenon partly reflects the changing reasons for leaving the parental home over recent generations. According to the 2001 GSS, getting married and having a job were the two main reasons why the War/Depression birth cohort left home for the first time; by the time Generation X was ready to go, being independent and going to school were



Demographic and socio-economic factors associated with home returning

	Men	Women		Men	Women
	Risk ratios			Risk ratios	
Birth cohort			Birth place of mother		
<i>War/Depression</i>	1.00	1.00	<i>Mother born in Canada</i>	1.00	1.00
Wave 1 Boomers	1.20	1.39*	Born outside Canada	0.97	0.83*
Wave 2 Boomers	1.64*	1.82*	Religious attendance at age 15		
Generation X	2.07*	2.43*	<i>Weekly</i>	1.00	1.00
Generation Y	2.81*	3.28*	Sometimes	1.19*	1.20*
Age when first left home			Never	1.10	1.10
15 to 17 years old	1.74*	2.08*	Region of residence at age 15		
18 to 20 years old	1.42*	1.78*	<i>Quebec</i>	1.00	1.00
21 years or older	1.00	1.00	Atlantic	1.41*	1.54*
Main reason for leaving			Ontario	1.49*	1.65*
<i>Because of a job</i>	1.00	1.00	Prairies	1.31*	1.58*
To be independent	1.03	1.14	British Columbia	1.48*	1.42*
To attend school	1.32*	1.38*	Outside of Canada	0.62*	0.84
To marry or live common-law	0.24*	0.29*	Size of city where respondent lived at age 15		
Other	1.04	1.32	Less than 5,000	0.74*	0.79
Family structure while growing up			5,000 to 24,999	0.79*	0.92
<i>Two-parent intact family</i>	1.00	1.00	25,000 to 99,999	0.84	1.23
Step-parent	0.89	0.74*	100,000 to 999,999	0.96	1.40*
Lone-parent	0.57*	0.77*	<i>Lived in city of 1,000,000 or more</i>	1.00	1.00
Other	0.43*	0.35*	Level of schooling of respondent¹		
Employment status of mother when respondent was age 15			Less than secondary	1.13	1.13
<i>Mother worked</i>	1.00	1.00	<i>Had secondary diploma</i>	1.00	1.00
Did not work	0.85*	0.80*	Partial or completed postsecondary studies	0.80*	1.09
Employment status of father when respondent was age 15			Employment status of respondent¹		
<i>Father worked</i>	1.00	1.00	<i>Did not work</i>	1.00	1.00
Did not work	1.07	0.61	Did work	0.71*	0.94

1. These variables can change over time as the respondent ages; for example, an individual is more likely to have postsecondary education or employment at age 22 than at age 15.

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

Note: Risk ratios over 1.0 indicate a higher risk associated with that characteristic, compared to the reference group (shown in italics); a risk ratio less than 1.0 indicates a lower risk, when all other variables in the model are controlled for.

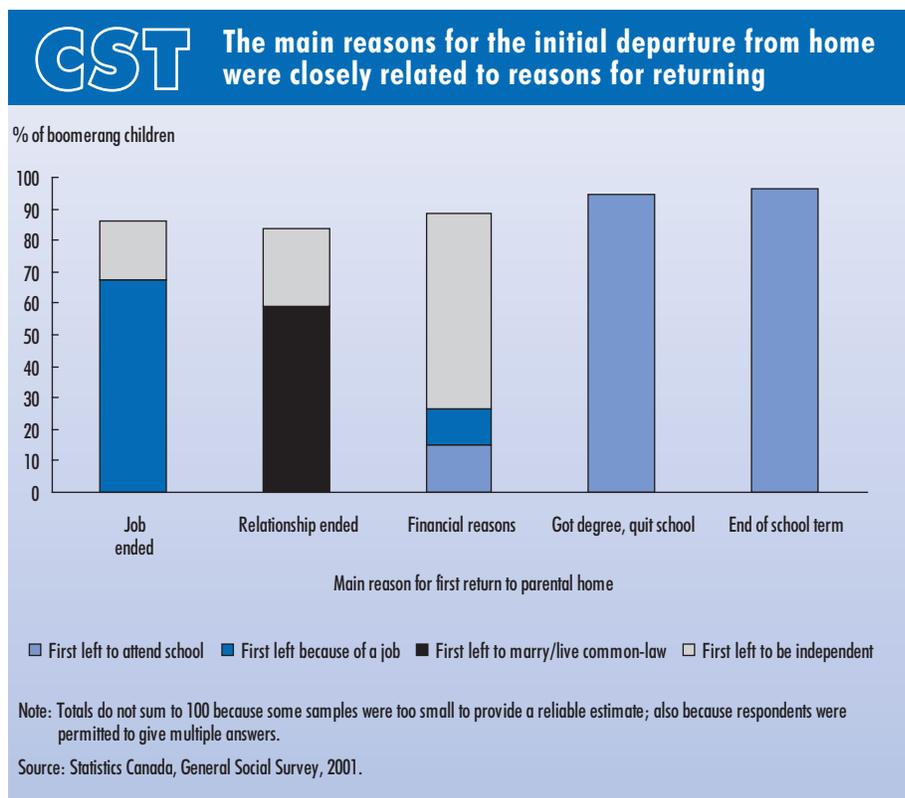
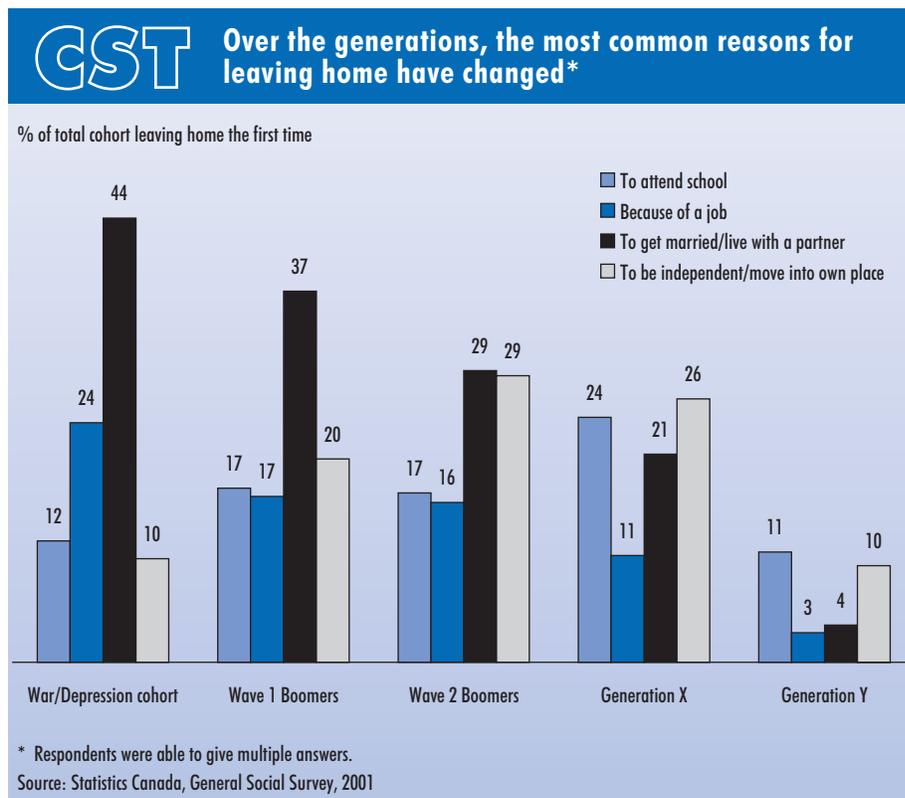
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

the top-ranked reasons. And generally speaking, people who move out to attend school, live independently or because of work have a greater likelihood of returning home than those who leave to marry.¹⁰

A brief review of why adult children come back to their family home offers some insight into why their reason for going is a useful predictor of the likelihood that they will return. There are five main reasons why boomerang kids come home (respondents were permitted to give multiple answers). The most common is education-related: either it was the end of the school year (19%) or they had finished their program or quit school (8%). Another 25% returned the first time for financial reasons, while 12% said their job had ended. Just over one in ten (11%) came home with a broken heart, seeking their parents' sympathy at the end of a relationship.

Refining this idea further, the boomerang kids who most often returned for education-related reasons were those who had left to attend college or university; the large majority of those who returned because they got into financial difficulty were those who had moved out to be independent or to attend school; and those who came back because their job had ended had most often left in order to take the job.

The hazard models confirm this link between the reason for the initial departure and a return home. Men and women who left to pursue their studies had a 32% and a 38% higher chance, respectively, of coming back home in comparison with those who moved out because of a job. On the other hand, men who left home to form a union were about 76% less likely to return, while women had a 71% lower risk, when all other variables in the model are controlled for. This confirms earlier research that has also found that departures for education- or employment-related reasons have higher probabilities of boomeranging than adult children who leave to form a relationship.¹¹ Leaving home to be independent is



not statistically significantly different than leaving because of a job, when all other variables in the model are taken into account.

...leaving before age 18

Young adults who first leave home as teenagers have a higher probability of returning to their parents' home. For those who left home between 15 and 17 years of age, men had a 74% greater likelihood and women over two times higher risk of return compared to those who waited until they were at least 21. The risk was lower among 18- to 20-year-olds leaving home for the first time. This result matches previous research

which has found that boomerang kids tend to leave the parental nest at younger ages; moreover, the younger they are at their first departure, the more likely they are to boomerang multiple times.¹²

...occasionally attending religious services

Young adults who had sometimes gone to religious services at age 15 had a higher probability of coming back home. Compared to those who had gone to church, temple or mosque each week, the likelihood of returning was 19% greater for men and 20% greater for women who had attended services occasionally when they were teens.

Young adults who had never gone to religious services in their adolescence were neither more nor less likely to return to the nest than those who had gone every week.

...and growing up outside Quebec

Young adults who grew up in Quebec tend to be older than those in other provinces when they leave home,¹³ but once they go, they are the least likely to return. Youngsters from Ontario and the West show the highest propensity to come back home. Men who spent their adolescence in Ontario (49%) or B.C. (48%) had the greatest likelihood of returning home compared to men

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 one of the 10 provinces. One extensive 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 departures from the parental home allows the transition to adult independence to be studied 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 mainly 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 cohort – born between 1932 and 1946, and 55 to 69 years old at the time of the GSS.

The pattern of returning home after a person's first departure 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 returning to the parental home by cohorts. Second, event history analysis is used to identify the demographic and socio-economic factors associated with returning home. These factors are presented as risk ratios.

Return: An adult child's return to live in the parental home after their first departure.

Boomerang: An adult child's return to the parental home after a period of living independently. Thus, *boomerang kid*.

Risk ratios: The estimated probability that compared with a reference individual, an individual with a certain characteristic will return to the parental home for the first time. This is expressed in the article as "a higher/lower probability compared with a reference person of the same age" or "a higher/lower likelihood of returning home than someone in the reference group."

The risk ratios were calculated with a proportional hazard model using the following explanatory variables: respondent's birth cohort; family environment when the respondent was age 15 (family composition, mother's and father's employment status, mother's birthplace, religious attendance); the geographic characteristics of the respondent's place of residence when he or she was 15 (region/province/foreign country, size of town/city); and the level of educational attainment the respondent had obtained by the time he or she left the parental home, and employment status. Separate models were run for men and women.

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

raised in Quebec. Meanwhile, women who grew up in Ontario (65%) and the Prairies (58%) had much higher risks of return than young Québécoises, when all other variables in the model are controlled for.

It is not clear why there is such a difference in the home returning patterns of Quebecers and other young Canadian adults. Previous research suggests that Anglophones may be socialized to accept leaving home as a process that may also include returning home. In contrast, this same research also suggests that the social norms for Francophones seem to expect more autonomy and independence once the first launch from home is achieved. Perhaps young adults in Quebec delay leaving the family home until they are confident that a return will not be necessary.¹⁴

Factors that discourage a return to the nest are growing up in a small town or a foreign country...

Not surprisingly, having been raised in a small town of less than 5,000 people reduces the likelihood that a young adult will return home by 26% for men, compared to being brought up in a city of over one million people. Most probably, these youngsters felt that more education and employment opportunities awaited them in a large city.

Growing up in another country also reduced the likelihood that men would return to the parental home; their risk of coming back was 38% lower compared to young men raised in Quebec. For women, spending at least part of their own childhood abroad did not have an impact when other factors are taken into account. However, if their mother was born outside Canada, a woman's risk of moving back in with her parents was 17% lower than that for women with Canadian-born mothers. For men, their mother's country of birth did not play a role in the probability that they would return home after their initial departure.

...being raised in a non-traditional family

A non-traditional family structure deters returning home, perhaps because of the resources lacking in many lone-parent families or the tensions arising within a reconstituted family. Both situations affected the likelihood that young women would return home; if they had lived in either a lone-parent or a stepfamily, their chances of coming back were 23% and 26% lower, respectively, than if they had grown up with both biological parents. Men raised by a lone parent had a 43% lower risk of returning home compared to those who grew up in a two-parent intact household, but growing up in a stepfamily did not have a significant impact.

...having a higher level of education and a job

More educated men have reduced chances of returning to the parental home, when all other factors are controlled for. Compared to men who had left home with a high school diploma, men who had a partial or complete postsecondary education were 20% less likely to come back. As would be expected, men who were employed when they first moved out of the family nest were also less likely to return home (29% lower risk) than those who had not had a job at the time of their first departure. Young men with these resources – that is, education and a job – are better able to support themselves and therefore less reliant on the safety net of the family home.

In contrast, neither employment status nor education at the time she left home had a significant effect on the probability that a woman would return to her parents.

Whether or not their father had been employed during a young adult's childhood did not have a significant impact on their risk of returning home. However, both men and women had a reduced likelihood of coming home if their mother had not

been in the workforce (15% and 20% lower, respectively), perhaps because they knew that fewer resources were available to help them. Indeed, previous research has noted the higher rates of return to more affluent families and suggested that coming back home may be an informal social safety net accessible to those who are already advantaged.¹⁵

Summary

This study has identified five socio-demographic factors that significantly affect the likelihood that a young adult will be a boomerang kid. These are: the generation into which he or she was born; the reason for leaving home; leaving home for the first time when still a teenager; occasionally attending religious services during adolescence; and growing up in a province other than Quebec.

Among the factors that reduce the risk of an adult child boomeranging are: being raised in a lone-parent or step-parent family; having a mother who did not work outside the home during the child's adolescence; and, for men, having a postsecondary education, a job and growing up in a very small town.



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Table A.1 Cumulative probabilities of first return to the parental home for male and female birth cohorts 1932-1976, Canada

Years elapsed since initial departure	Generation, age in 2001 at time of the survey, year of birth								
	Generation X		Wave 2 Baby Boomers		Wave 1 Baby Boomers		War/Depression cohort		
	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
	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								
0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
1	7.3	5.3	3.8	4.0	4.9	3.7	2.0	2.1	2.5
2	16.3	12.6	9.3	11.5	11.4	8.0	5.5	4.1	5.8
3	21.9	17.5	13.3	15.5	13.4	10.0	6.8	5.9	7.0
4	27.7	20.3	14.8	17.4	15.4	11.2	8.6	6.8	7.2
5	32.1	22.7	16.6	18.6	16.3	11.8	9.7	7.5	8.7
6	33.5	23.8	18.6	19.7	17.0	12.3	10.4	8.2	9.1
7	34.1	24.4	19.2	20.1	17.3	12.6	10.5	8.3	9.4
8	35.0	25.8	19.8	20.4	17.6	13.0	10.7	8.6	9.4
9	35.9	26.0	20.2	20.5	17.7	13.5	10.9	8.6	9.5
10	37.1	26.4	20.5	20.5	17.7	13.6	10.9	8.6	9.5
Women									
	Probabilities								
0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
1	7.9	6.2	4.7	4.8	3.2	2.2	1.5	1.0	1.4
2	16.5	12.7	11.3	9.2	6.8	5.4	3.7	3.7	3.2
3	20.6	17.2	15.7	12.2	11.0	7.6	5.6	5.2	4.5
4	24.4	19.9	17.9	13.5	12.6	8.9	7.0	6.2	4.7
5	27.6	21.5	19.5	14.7	13.1	10.1	7.8	6.5	4.7
6	29.1	23.3	20.2	15.7	13.3	10.6	8.3	6.8	4.9
7	30.6	23.8	21.1	16.2	13.6	10.8	8.6	7.0	5.0
8	32.4	24.6	21.4	16.4	13.9	11.1	8.9	7.4	5.0
9	34.0	25.2	21.6	17.2	14.3	11.4	8.9	7.4	5.1
10		25.7	22.1	17.5	14.6	11.5	8.9	7.6	5.1

Source: Statistics Canada, life tables created with the 2001 General Social Survey.