

Article

Making fathers “count”

by *Pascale Beaupré, Heather Dryburgh and Michael Wendt*



June 8, 2010

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Introduction

Once considered the “forgotten parent”¹, fathers have been the focus of numerous studies in recent decades. This shift has taken place against a backdrop of major social and economic changes: more people spending more time pursuing higher levels of education; weaker marital ties (with common-law unions becoming more common and marriage losing popularity); and increased participation of women in the labour force. As women have been encouraged to enter the public sphere, men have been occupying a greater place in the domestic sphere. Once confined to the role of breadwinner, today’s fathers are more likely to be involved in the day-to-day care giving of children (see “Fathers involvement”).

Until quite recently studies on the family focused mainly on mothers. However, many national surveys interview men and women and data on fathers are available, yet few studies examine parenthood from the father’s perspective. There are several reasons for this. First, the field of sociology of the family maintains that the family sphere and care of children are mainly the concern of women. Second, the notion that men’s family experiences merely mirror those of women, albeit with a two to three year time lag, has led researchers to study parental and family paths almost exclusively from the female perspective.²

Of the studies that have been done on fatherhood, most have examined paternal involvement or compared the maternal and paternal behaviours and the needs of particular subgroups of fathers (especially lone-parent fathers). In these studies, researchers stress that statistics specifically relating to fathers are rare.^{3,4,5} Although there is information that can be used to draw a detailed portrait, more often than not fatherhood is examined from the perspective of the census family or the marital relationship.⁶

This article fills the gap identified by researchers by describing the situation of fathers in Canada. Using data from the 1995 and 2006 General Social Survey (GSS) on the family, this article describes changes in the profiles of fathers during this period. In particular, it examines the sociodemographic, conjugal and family characteristics of fathers. The article focuses on the overall situation of fathers; it does not seek to analyse the more specific realities of some types of fathers (immigrant, gay, teenage or inmate fathers) (see “What you should know about this study”).⁷

Fathers: an overview

The 1995 General Social Survey estimated that there were 4,167,000 fathers with at least one child aged 18 or under. Slightly more than ten years later, there were 4,266,000,

an increase of 2.3%. In comparison, the total population grew by 11.2% during the same period.

The average age of fathers is rising

Effects of the overall population aging are reflected in the age distribution of fathers. Several factors—young people leaving the parental home at older ages, men forming conjugal unions at older ages, becoming parents at later ages, and forming new unions, and thus second families, sooner after a previous union breaks down—all contribute to the rising age of fathers.

The average age of fathers now exceeds 40: it was 41.6 years in 2006, compared to 39.8 in 1995 (Table 1) — an increase of 1.8 years over the study period.

Although the age distribution of fathers reveals that slightly more than three-quarters were between 30 and 49 years of age in both 1995 and 2006, this masks major changes over the period. In 1995, nearly 44% of fathers were in their thirties and 36% were in their forties. Some ten years later, the situation was reversed: 33% were aged 30 to 39 and 44% were in their forties. Additionally, the proportion of fathers in their fifties increased from 10% in 1995 to 15% in 2006.

On the other hand, the distribution of fathers according to the age of the youngest child shows that the

What you should know about this study

Before drawing a portrait of fathers in Canada, it is necessary to specify what is meant by "father." At first glance, this seems quite simple, but over time the paternal sphere has become increasingly complex.^{1,2,3,4,5} A look to the past reveals that the word "father" has had various meanings, depending on the period. Beyond a simple biological bond between a child and an adult male, the current meaning of fatherhood also has a social construction. As Dubeau and her colleagues put it, "To be a father, it takes more than to be a procreator!"⁶

The data in this article are drawn from two different GSS cycles on the family: cycle 10, conducted in 1995, and cycle 20, conducted in 2006. The target population includes all non-institutionalized persons 15 years of age or older living in the ten provinces. In 1995, 10,749 persons were interviewed by telephone. Of them, slightly more than 4,800 were males. In the 2006 survey, just over 23,600 persons, including slightly more than 10,350 males, were interviewed.

Fathers interviewed by the GSS are identified in two stages. First, all the links among the members of each household contacted were determined. This allows for the identification of men who were living in a household that included their own or other children. The children in the household may have been the man's biological or adopted children, his spouse's children or the children of another member of the household with whom he is living (co-tenant, friend or other related member).⁷

The GSS also includes a section on the respondent's children. In addition to validating the information collected on household composition, this section identifies fathers according to whether or not they are living with their biological or adopted children.

With these two steps, the fathers for this study were identified. Fathers were defined as between age 18 to 65 at the time of the survey who were living with or reported having fathered, adopted or reared a child who was 18 years of age or under at the time of the survey. The resulted in a sample of 1,749 fathers in 1995 and 3,080 in 2006, and includes fathers, stepfathers and fathers who do not necessarily live with their children.

The information presented illustrates the distribution of fathers according to various characteristics. To evaluate the statistical significance of the variations observed, the proportions were first estimated using the weights from the GSS survey; then the estimate of variance of these estimates was verified using the bootstrap method. Statistical significance was calculated according to a threshold of 5% ($p < 0.05$). In this article, only statistically significant results are commented on.

The statistics outlined in this article provide a snapshot of fatherhood at a specific point in time. Following the example of Desrosiers and her colleagues, it would be useful to adopt a more dynamic perspective on fatherhood by tracing men's conjugal and parental paths.⁸

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7. This distinction based on the child's status cannot be captured using the census since the only basis for determining relationships among household members is via the reference person.
8. Desrosiers, H., H. Juby and C. Le Bourdais (2000). Male Family Paths, in *Canadian Families at the Approach of the Year 2000*, published under the direction of Y. Peron. Statistics Canada catalogue no. 96-321, pp. 155-206.

Table 1 Distribution of fathers by different age indicators, Canada, 1995 and 2006

	Fathers	
	1995 †	2006
	percentage	
Age of father		
18 to 29	10.1	8.1
30 to 39	43.5	33.4*
40 to 49	35.9	43.6*
50 to 65	10.4	14.9*
Age of youngest child		
0 to 4	38.5	32.7*
5 to 12	36.0	39.2*
13 to 18	25.4	28.1*
	years	
Average age of father	39.8	41.6*
Average age of youngest child	7.6	8.3*

† reference group

* statistically significant difference from the reference group at $p < 0.05$

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995 and 2006.

proportion of fathers with preschool-age children declined between 1995 and 2006. Whereas 39% of fathers had a child less than 5 years of age in 1995, this was the case for 33% of fathers roughly ten years later. By 2006, fathers whose youngest child was between 5 and 12 years of age (39%) or between 13 and 18 years of age (28%) were proportionally more numerous than in 1995 (Table 1).

A larger proportion of fathers living common-law

Forty years ago, marriage was the norm and it was through marriage that most people formed couples and integrated into family networks. Almost all children were born to married parents and grew up with them. Today, many children either are born outside of marriage or experience the divorce of their parents while they are still young.

Despite these changes, the majority of fathers are married. While the proportions of married and divorced fathers declined, the proportion of unmarried fathers,

either in common-law unions or without a spouse, increased. This increase was largely due to the growing popularity of common-law unions, both for forming a union and for creating a family (especially in Quebec). Nearly 18% of fathers were living in a common-law union in 2006, compared to 13% in 1995.

In 2006, the region of residence continued to be a factor in the type of conjugal relationship: common-law unions were more widespread among Quebec fathers, while marriage was the predominant type of union for fathers in the provinces outside of Quebec.

Between 1995 and 2006, GSS data show a marked change in the types of conjugal relationships formed in Quebec, where the attractiveness of marriage declined in favour of common-law unions. For example in 2006 less than half of Quebec fathers were married. The gap that had previously existed between married fathers and fathers in common-law unions had narrowed substantially: by 2006 nearly 40% of Quebec fathers

were living in common-law unions (Table 2). Elsewhere in Canada, the proportion of married fathers did not change significantly, but the proportion of fathers in common-law unions was up slightly.

Finally, the proportion of fathers without spouses remained fairly stable, ranging between 10% and 12% depending on the period and region.

In 2006 fathers more likely than in 1995 to be the head of a lone-parent family

The complexity of Canadians' marital histories has led to a diversification in the types of families (see "Definitions"). While there has been a decline in the number of families with two parents who have only ever been married to each other, other types of families, such as step and lone-parent families, have emerged. Consequently, there are a growing number of men entering unions that include children from a partner's previous relationship.

Despite this, a majority of fathers live in an intact two-parent situation: in 2006 just over 3,169,000 fathers were living with their spouse and children (birth or adopted).

Separations and divorces, which have become increasingly common, result in an increase in the number of lone parents. From 1995 to 2006, the proportion of fathers who were lone-parents rose from 5% to 8% (Table 3). The number of lone-parent fathers stood at more than 338,000 in 2006. With the growing popularity of common-law unions, the number of never-married lone-parent fathers has increased, while the number of divorced or separated lone-parent fathers declined. Compared to the children of fathers living in an intact two-parent situation, the children of lone-parent fathers tended to be older: in 2006, half of fathers heading a lone-parent family were living with children aged 5 to 12. When dad and mom lived together, the proportion of dads with children aged 5 to 12 was 38%.

Table 2 Distribution of fathers by marital status, Quebec and other provinces, 1995 and 2006

Marital status	Fathers			
	Quebec		Other provinces	
	1995 †	2006	1995 †	2006
	percentage			
Married	61.8	48.4*	81.4	79.0
Common-law	26.4	39.7*	8.6	10.8*
No spouse	11.8	11.9	10.0	10.1

† reference group

* statistically significant difference from the reference group at $p < 0.05$

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995 and 2006.

Table 3 Distribution of fathers by family type, Canada, 1995 and 2006

Family type	Fathers	
	1995 †	2006
	percentage	
Intact family	76.0	74.3
Lone-parent family	5.3	7.9*
Stepfamily	11.5	13.4*
With no children in household	7.2	4.4*

† reference group

* statistically significant difference from the reference group at $p < 0.05$

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995 and 2006.

In most cases, stepfamilies are what is known as "simple": they include the children of just one of the spouses. For fathers living in a stepfamily, two family statuses are considered: a) the men were childless or their children were not living with them when the stepfamily was created; and b) the men were already living with children when they formed the union (either children born outside of a union or children born in a union since dissolved). Data show that it was more common for men to form a union that includes only the children of the female partner.

Simple stepfamilies become complex following a birth of another child.⁹ Among fathers living in a blended family with children born or adopted within the new union, the majority were raising the children of just one sibling relationship, usually the woman's child. The distribution of fathers in stepfamilies by the age of their children was similar to the distribution of fathers in intact families. In 2006, 30% of fathers in stepfamilies had children aged 0 to 4, 44% had children aged 5 to 12, and 27%, children aged 13 to 18.

Although families have changed and there are more types of family structures, most dads lived with their children full-time. Indeed in 2006, eight-in-ten fathers lived full-time with their children—about the same as in 1995 (Table 4).

Shared custody is increasingly common.^{10,11} As a result, fathers whose children lived with them part-time were more common than were fathers whose children did not live with them. In 2006, 11% of fathers had at least one child living part-time in their household, while a smaller proportion (5%) did not live with any of their children. In comparison, in 1995, 8% had at least one child living under their roof part-time and 7% did not live with any of their children (Table 4).

Some fathers do not live with their children (birth or adopted) and their children live with the mother or elsewhere. The proportion of fathers without any children in their home declined significantly, going from 7% in 1995 to 4% some ten years later (Table 3). In 2006, there were slightly more than 186,000 fathers with this living arrangement. The increasing number of fathers with custody of their children reflects an increase in lone-parent fathers and the decrease in fathers who are living without their children and is mainly due to the fact that mothers are less frequently being awarded sole custody of children following a union breakdown.⁸

The average age of fathers who were not living with their children was 44.5 years in 2006. As was the case for lone-parent fathers, fathers without children in their household had older children: in 2006, 34% of these fathers had children between 5 and 12 years of age, while 55% had children between 13 and 18 years of age.

As a result of marital instability, the number of stepfamilies has grown: in 2006, approximately 572,000 fathers (13%) lived in a stepfamily. This was up slightly from 1995 (12%). Among fathers in stepfamilies, there was an even split between those in marriages and those in common-law unions.

Table 4 Distribution of fathers by residence status of children in the household, Canada, 1995 and 2006

	Fathers	
	1995 †	2006
	percentage	
Residence status of children in father's household		
All children live there full-time	81.8	80.6
At least 1 child lives there part-time ¹	7.6	11.4*
At least 1 child lives elsewhere ²	3.4	3.5
All children live elsewhere	7.2	4.5*

† reference group

* statistically significant difference from the reference group at $p < 0.05$

1. May include a mixture of situations, with some children living elsewhere and some children living in the household full-time or part-time.

2. May include a mixture of situations, with some children living elsewhere and some children living in the household full-time, but no child living in the household part-time.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995 and 2006.

have never experienced fatherhood.¹⁹ Fathers living with minor children recognize that they have obligations and responsibilities and have taken on the role of a “good provider.”

During the study period, the unemployment rate among males aged 15 and over dropped substantially—from 9.8% in 1995 to 6.5% in 2006. As a result, it is not surprising that all types of fathers saw their employment status stabilize or improve. Fathers heading a lone-parent family registered the largest advance in employment status, with the proportion employed increasing from 77% in 1995 to 87% in 2006. This improvement in employment status may be related to the fact that increasing numbers of fathers are awarded sole custody of their children following a union breakdown. These fathers may not be able to count on financial support from the other parent and must have a regular job to support their family and ensure its wellbeing.

Among all types of fathers, the highest proportion with employment was found among fathers in two-parent families (intact or step): slightly more than 9 in 10 had a job. Conversely, a smaller proportion (80%) of fathers without children in the household had a job. During the study period, the employment status of fathers not living with their children remained stable.

Almost 6 in 10 fathers have a personal income of \$50,000 or more

The GSS collects information on income,²⁰ both personal and household. This article focuses on personal income, as it is the situation of fathers and not the situation of their households (which may include the income of other household members) being described. For some fathers, household income is equal to personal income. This is the case with lone-parent fathers, most fathers with no children in their household and fathers whose spouse is unemployed.²¹

Fatherhood is beginning later in life

The most common path to fatherhood is biological: slightly more than nine in ten fathers become fathers with the birth of their first child. However, a man can also become a parent by other means such as adoption¹² or by becoming a stepfather. From 1995 to 2006, the proportion of men whose first parental experience occurred as the result of family blending changed very little: in 2006, for about 9% of fathers the first experience of fatherhood was as a stepfather, in 1995 the corresponding proportion was 8%.

In Canada, the age at which people become parents is rising. A number of studies emphasize that during the past 20 years, there has been a decline in the fertility rate of Canadian women in their twenties, while the rate for women in their thirties has risen steadily.^{13,14} Following the upward trend in the average age of women at the time of their first birth, the average age¹⁵ of fathers at the time of their entry into fatherhood increased significantly from 27.8 to 29.1 between 1995 and 2006.

A growing proportion of fathers are employed

Obviously, the social condition of fathers in Canada varies according to their family type. Whether they are alone or are part of a two-parent family, fathers are stakeholders in the economic realities of their families: they are subject to job insecurity and unemployment, and they are exposed to income insecurity, indebtedness and the conditions linked with these situations. Studies on the economic conditions of fathers as a group are few or non-existent. Studies that have been done focus mainly on the economic condition of lone fathers.^{16,17}

The GSS provides information on employment status¹⁸ and income and how these change over time. The vast majority of all fathers in Canada are gainfully employed. While about 90% of fathers had a job in 1995, in 2006 the proportion was 94%. Research out of the United States has stressed that fathers living with at least one child under 18 years of age assign more importance to participating in the labour force and devote more hours to their labour market participation per week than men who have older children or who

Father's involvement

Some research on parental involvement with children has been conducted in Canada in recent years, leading to the belief that fathers of today are more involved with their children than their own fathers were with them. Today fathers are involved during the pregnancy, they are present at ultrasounds, they help with the labour and birth, and are present and involved in the lives of their young children.¹

One explanation for the increasing active participation of fathers is a result of women's increased participation in the labour force.² This, coupled with the less traditional division of family roles and responsibilities by mothers and fathers as well as the desire of fathers themselves to be closer to their children are factors that may explain this growing role for fathers. Given the growing diversity of families in Canada,³ and the known importance of fathers' involvement with their children, it is important to understand the level of involvement of fathers for each family type – lone fathers, fathers in reconstituted families, or fathers who do not live with their children – compared with fathers in intact families.

Father involvement can vary depending on the age of the child and their level of dependence.⁴ The 2006 GSS data show that fathers who had a child in the year prior to the survey were more likely to take paid or unpaid leave at the time of the child's birth than were fathers who had a child 5 years prior to the survey.⁵ However, when the data are disaggregated by father type it is clear that fathers in intact families were significantly more likely to take paid or unpaid parental leave than were lone-parent fathers or fathers whose children did not live with them.

Work responsibilities can affect the amount of time parents spend with their children throughout their early years. However, in the 2006 GSS when fathers were asked how often in the past 12 months it had been difficult to fulfill their family responsibilities because of the amount of time they spent on their job, there was no difference between fathers in the four family arrangement types. About 85% of fathers in each type of family arrangement indicated they experienced this difficulty either never or sometimes. Similarly, when fathers were asked whether they found it difficult to concentrate or fulfill their work responsibilities because of their family responsibilities over 92% of fathers in each family arrangement type said 'never' or 'sometimes.'

One factor related to father involvement in families where there is a separation or divorce is the existence of a legal agreement on the amount of time the child spends with each parent. According to 2006 data, lone fathers who were living with their children and had separated or divorced in the previous 5 years were much more likely than fathers not living with their children to have an agreement with their ex-spouse or partner related to the time the child spends with each parent as well as an agreement on who makes the major decisions for the child. This, and the fact that lone fathers have custody of their children, may account for the significantly higher likelihood that lone fathers reported being involved 'all of the time' with their children's regular care (such as school, daycare or social activities) and decision-making over the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with fathers not living with their children.

There were no significant differences between lone fathers, fathers in reconstituted families or fathers not living with their children in their satisfaction with the amount of time they spent with their children. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of fathers in these family types were satisfied or very satisfied with the time they spent with their child or children.

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From 1995 to 2006, the personal income of all types of fathers increased.²² In 1995, about 29% of fathers reported a personal income of less than \$30,000. The proportion fell to 16% in 2006 (in constant dollars). There was also a reduction, although not as large, in the proportion of fathers with personal incomes of between \$30,000 and \$50,000: 26% in 2006 compared to 37% in 1995. There was a much greater change, in a positive direction, in the proportion

of fathers with a personal income of \$50,000 or more—from 35% in 1995 to 58% in 2006 (Table 5).

The personal financial situation of fathers in intact families was the opposite of fathers not living with their children: in 2006, 60% of fathers without children in the home had a personal income of less than \$50,000, while about the same proportion of fathers in intact families had an income of \$50,000 or more (Table 5).

The personal income of fathers living in stepfamilies was close to that of fathers of lone-parent families. However, fathers of lone-parent families were proportionally more likely have a personal income of \$30,000 or less (data not shown).

A link can be established between education and income. Overall, the vast majority of fathers had finished high school: in 2006, 88% of dads had a high school diploma. The proportion of dads who had completed postsecondary studies increased from 48% in 1995 to 60% in 2006. Compared to fathers in intact families, fathers without children in the home and fathers in stepfamilies were more likely not to have finished high school – the same fathers that were more likely to have incomes of \$30,000 or less.

Table 5 Distribution of fathers by family type and personal income,¹ Canada, 2006

Family type	Fathers with personal income of	
	Less than \$50,000	\$50,000 and more†
	percentage	
Intact family	38.5*	61.5
Lone-parent family	49.8*	50.2
Stepfamily	48.1*	51.9
With no children in household	60.1*	39.9
Total	41.6*	58.4

† reference group
 * statistically significant difference from the reference group at p < 0.05
 1. Expressed in constant dollars, according to 2002 Consumer Price Index.
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2006.

Most fathers lived in a home owned by someone in their household

Income differences across various family types are likely associated with diverse lifestyles: people with more income tend to have more lifestyle choices than people with less income. How a family is housed is one of the revealing indicators of its lifestyle. Between 1985 and 2006, the proportion of Canadians who lived in dwellings owned by a member of the household increased gradually from approximately 70% to 78%.²³ The same trend emerges for fathers between 1995 and 2006: the number of fathers living in a dwelling owned by a member of the household rose from 76% to 83%.

Between 1995 and 2006, apart from lone-parent fathers, the proportion of all groups of fathers whose residence was owned by a member of the household increased. The increase was the largest among fathers in stepfamilies (from 67% to 80%) and fathers with none of their children in the household (from 50% to 61%) (Table 6).

The data show a few variations among father groups as to access to ownership. Of all fathers, those

Table 6 Distribution of fathers by family type and living in a dwelling owned by a member of the household, Canada, 1995 and 2006

Family type	Fathers	
	1995 †	2006
	percentage	
Intact family	81.5	87.0*
Lone-parent family	59.2	66.5
Stepfamily	67.2	80.1*
With no children in household	50.1	61.4*
Total	76.4	83.4*

† reference group
 * statistically significant difference from the reference group at p < 0.05
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995 and 2006.

living in intact families had the greatest access to ownership, with nearly 90% of them in 2006 living in a dwelling owned by a member of the household. They were followed by fathers in stepfamilies (80%). Fathers in lone-parent families and those with no children in the home had comparable access to ownership: of the fathers in these two groups, more than 60% in 2006 lived in a dwelling owned by a member of the household. This lower incidence may be related to the fact that these two groups of fathers had the lowest personal incomes among the groups.

Summary

Major social transformations resulting from the growing fragility of conjugal unions and the two-fold movement of the liberation of women and their entry into the labour force, have changed both the representation of fatherhood and how it is practised in daily life. Once considered only an authority figure and a breadwinner, today's fathers actively participate in the day-to-day care giving and emotional support of their children.

In 2006, there were an estimated 4,266,000 fathers with at least one child under 18 years of age, up from 4,167,000 in 1995. The aging of the overall population is reflected in the age distribution of fathers—in 2006, the average age of fathers was over 40. The proportion of fathers with preschool-aged children declined between 1995 and 2006. Conversely, the proportion of fathers whose youngest child was between 5 and 12 or between 13 and 18 years of age grew over the same period.

While the proportion of married or divorced fathers declined between 1995 and 2006, the proportion of unmarried fathers rose. This increase was mainly due to the growing popularity of common-law unions. Despite this, the majority of fathers were married. However, there were regional differences: marriage was the predominant type of union for fathers outside Quebec, while common-law unions were more prevalent for Quebec fathers.

Definitions

Intact two-parent family: refers to a man who lives with a female spouse/partner and the children (biological or adopted) born of their relationship.

Lone-parent family: refers to a man, without a spouse/partner, who lives with at least one of his children (biological or adopted).

Stepfamily: refers to a man who lives with a spouse/partner and at least one child who is not born or adopted of their relationship. A stepfamily may bring together children born or adopted outside the current union, with these being children of one or both partners, sometimes supplemented by children common to the couple.

With no children in the household: refers to a man who has fathered or reared one or more children and who does not live with any of his children (biological or adopted) at the time of the survey.

Children: refers to blood, step or adopted sons or daughters aged 18 or under at the time of the survey. These children may or may not live (either full-time or part-time) with their father.

The majority of fathers lived in an intact two-parent situation. However other paternal situations have emerged. The proportion of fathers as lone parents or within stepfamilies has risen since 1995. Conversely, the proportion of fathers not living with their children has declined over time.

Whether they are on their own or in a two-parent family, the vast majority of fathers in Canada were employed. All groups of fathers saw their employment status stabilize or improve between 1995 and 2006. Fathers in lone-parent families experienced the largest increases in employment status. Additionally, all groups of fathers registered an increase in personal income. The personal financial situation of fathers living in intact families was the most favourable. Conversely, lone-parent fathers and fathers without children in the home had the most vulnerable financial situation.

Of all fathers, those living in intact families had greater access to home ownership. In contrast, fathers in lone-parent families and fathers not living with their children were less likely to own their own homes.



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