

Twenty Years of Marriages

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Abstract

In 1994, a total of 159,959 marriages were performed in Canada, up only slightly from 159,316 the year before. This small increase had no effect on the crude marriage rate, which remained at 5.5 marriages per 1,000 population. Aside from a brief upturn in the late 1980s, Canada's marriage rate has fallen quite steadily since the early 1970s. The overall decline is also evident when rates are disaggregated by the prior marital status of the bride and groom (single, divorced or widowed).

Since 1974, the average ages of brides and grooms have risen about five years to 30.1 and 32.6, respectively. Nonetheless, the peak ages for marriage are the twenties. In this age range, women's marriage rates exceed those of men, but at older ages, men's rates are higher. And at progressively older ages, a growing proportion of grooms have brides at least 10 years their junior.

The marriage patterns of Quebec residents differ from those of other Canadians. Quebec residents are much more likely to remain single or live common-law, and if they do marry, they are slightly more likely to divorce. Once divorced or widowed, people in Quebec are less likely than those in the rest of Canada to remarry.

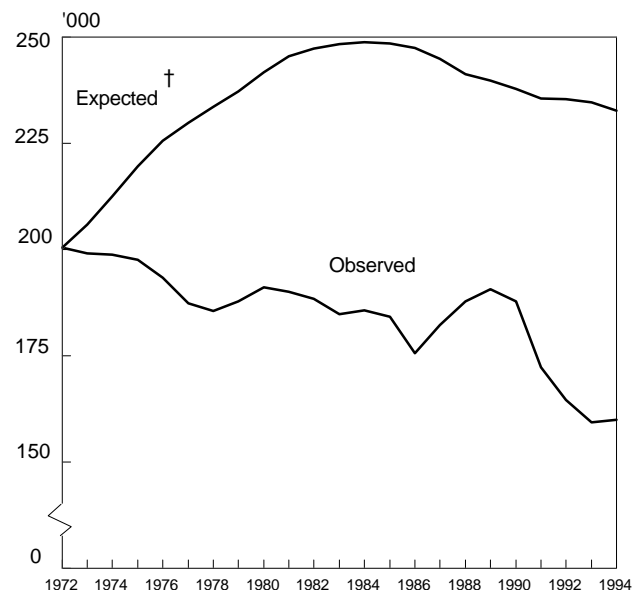
This article is based on data compiled by Statistics Canada from marriage registration forms provided by the central Vital Statistics Registry in each province and territory.

Key words: marriage, divorce, marital status, age at marriage, common-law

In 1972, for the first and only time, the number of marriages performed in Canada exceeded 200,000. That year, the crude marriage rate (marriages per 1,000 population) reached its highest level since the late 1940s. As well, the average ages at first marriage were among the lowest ever recorded: 22.2 for brides and 24.7 for grooms. All indications suggested that the immediate future would be a "golden age" for marriages. The oldest members of the baby boom generation were just entering their prime matrimonial years. And had the 1972 marriage rates persisted, the annual number of weddings would have risen steadily to close to 250,000 by 1984. But this never happened. Instead, the marriage rate dropped. As a result, the number of marriages in 1994 was 159,959, far below what would have been "expected" based on 1972 rates (Chart 1).

Chart 1

Expected and observed marriages, Canada, 1972-1994



Source: Observed - Catalogue 84-212; Expected - Author's calculations

† Based on 1972 age-specific marriage rates.

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The drop was interrupted briefly in the late 1980s, when the grounds for obtaining a divorce were liberalized, allowing many to remarry sooner than they otherwise would have. However, by 1990, the downward slide in marriage numbers and rates had resumed.

The decline in the numbers and in the rate of marriage over the past two decades has been attributed to a number of factors—changing values that made divorce and nonmarital childbearing more acceptable; widespread access to and use of contraception; women's growing participation in higher education and the workforce and their resulting financial independence; an unpredictable job market; and a generation pursuing self-fulfillment and avoiding long-term commitments.¹⁻⁵

This article examines national and provincial trends over the past 20 years in the numbers and rates of marriage by the age and previous marital status of the partners (see *Methods*). The data come from marriage registration forms provided to Statistics Canada by the central Vital Statistics Registry in each province and territory.

Numbers up slightly in 1994

After four years of rapid decline, the number of marriages in Canada rose slightly in 1994 (see *Appendix*). A total of 159,959 couples married that year, up 0.4% from 1993, but still well below the most recent peak of 190,640 in 1989 (see *A temporary reversal*). The small 1994 upturn did not occur everywhere, as the number of marriages fell in Prince

Methods

Data source

This article is based on *Marriages, 1994* (Catalogue 84-212).⁶ Statistics Canada compiles annual data on marriages provided by the central Vital Statistics Registry in each province and territory. This information includes the age and prior marital status of the bride and groom, and the date and place of the marriage. The data are edited by Statistics Canada to ensure consistency. Because of legal reporting requirements, the registration of marriages is virtually complete. And while the response rate for specific items varies depending on the province and the year, the 1994 response rate for the variables used in this article was 100%.

The denominators for the crude marriage rates are revised population estimates that include non-permanent residents, and that are adjusted for net census undercoverage. From 1981 on, the denominators are by legal marital status, matching the definition used on vital statistics certificates. Before 1981, common-law partners were counted among the married.

Multi-state life tables

The multi-state life table data in this article are based on *The decline of marriage in Canada, 1981 to 1991* (Catalogue 84-536).⁷

While annual marriage statistics provide a snapshot of a given year and reveal trends, they fail to answer some of the most natural questions about marriage. How many people never marry? What proportion of marriages end in divorce? How many divorced people remarry?

Ideally, these questions would be answered with longitudinal data, which require a long observation period. For example, to measure the exact proportion of people aged 15 in 1994 who never marry would mean following them until the last of them dies.

Similarly, to discover the exact proportion of marriages celebrated in 1994 that end in divorce would require tracing the partners until they divorce or die.

In the absence of such longitudinal statistics, period statistics can be calculated based on age-specific marriage and divorce rates in a given year. These statistics represent what would result if a group of people (a cohort) experienced through their lifetime the marriage and divorce rates observed at each age in a given year. Similar reasoning underlies the calculation of life expectancy and the total fertility rate for a given year. In the case of marriage and divorce, period statistics can be derived using the methodology of multi-state life tables.

Definitions

Marital status: Legal conjugal status of the bride and groom at the time of the marriage. Common-law is not regarded as a legal conjugal status.

Single: Persons who have never been married, or whose marriage has been annulled and who have not remarried.

Married: Persons who are legally married and who are not separated. **Common-law:** A couple who live together as husband and wife, but who are not legally married to each other.

Separated: Legally married persons whose spousal relationship has ended and who are not living with their spouse, but who have not obtained a divorce

Divorced: Persons who have obtained a divorce and who have not remarried.

Widowed: Persons whose spouse has died and who have not remarried.

Crude marriage rate: Number of marriages per 1,000 population.

Age-sex-specific marriage rate: Number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried men or 1,000 unmarried women in a specific age group.

A temporary reversal

After almost steady declines since 1980, the annual number of marriages in Canada began to rise in 1987. That year, the marriage rate, which had been falling for an even longer period, also rose. And until 1991, the number of marriages remained above 180,000.

This period seems to have offered a unique set of conditions favourable to starting a family. The rise in marriages followed an increase in divorces, resulting from amendments to the Divorce Act in 1985 that permitted faster marriage dissolution (after one year of separation rather than three).⁸ Many of these divorces were soon followed by remarriages. (Between 1986

and 1987, the marriage rate of divorced people jumped from 67.5 to 72.7 per 1,000.) The upturn in marriages coincided with a surge in home construction, and soon after, an increase in births.^{9,10} The biological clock was running out for the oldest baby boom women, who could no longer delay childbearing. Finally, the economy was strong, having recovered from the recession in the early 1980s.

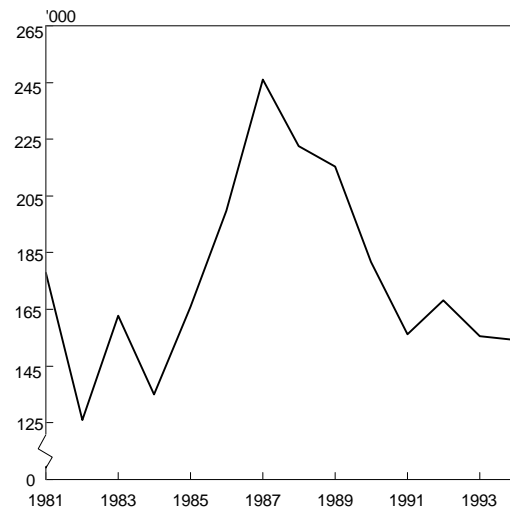
This period now appears to have been a short-term reversal of the general trend. The beginning of an economic recession in 1990 saw the annual number of marriages fall by more than 15,000 between 1990 and 1991, the largest single-year drop in the previous two decades.

Divorces, Canada, 1981-1994



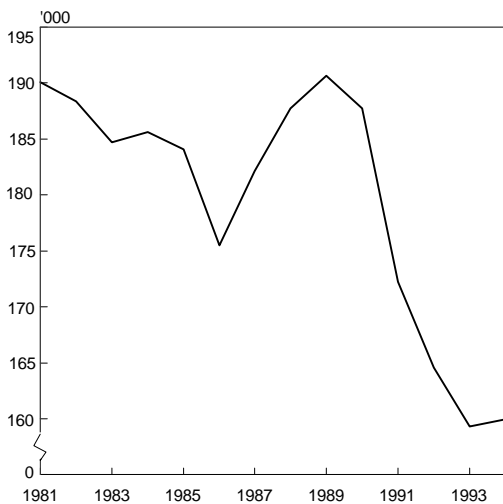
Source: Catalogue 84-213

Dwelling starts, Canada, 1981-1994



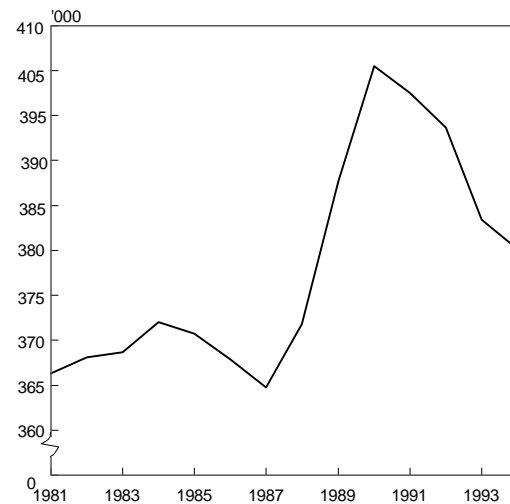
Source: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Canadian Housing Statistics, 1994

Marriages, Canada, 1981-1994



Source: Catalogue 84-212

Births, Canada, 1981-1994



Source: Catalogue 84-210

Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Manitoba, and the Yukon. Moreover, the slight overall increase in the number of marriages did not raise the nation's marriage rate, which in 1994 was 5.5 marriages per 1,000 population, the same as in 1993.

Canada's 1994 marriage rate was slightly higher than that of the European Union (5.2), but much lower than the rate in the United States (9.1).¹¹ Canada's marriage rate was also somewhat lower than that of Australia (5.8), New Zealand (6.2), or Japan (6.3) (Table 1).¹²

Table 1

Crude marriage rates, selected countries, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1994

Country	1975	1980	1985	1990	1994
Marriages per 1,000 population					
Canada	8.5	7.8	7.1	6.8	5.5
Australia	7.5	7.4	7.2	6.9	5.8
Belgium	7.3	6.7	5.8	6.5	5.1
Czechoslovakia	9.5	7.7	7.7	8.4	..
Denmark	6.3	5.2	5.7	6.1	6.8
Federal Republic of Germany	6.3	5.9	6.0	6.6	5.4
Finland	6.7	6.1	5.3	5.0	4.9
France	7.3	6.2	4.9	5.1	4.4
Greece	8.4	6.5	6.4	5.9	6.7
Hungary	9.9	7.5	6.9	6.4	..
Ireland	6.7	6.4	5.2	5.1	4.6
Israel	9.4	7.6	6.9	6.8	..
Italy	6.7	5.7	5.2	5.4	5.0
Japan	8.4	6.6	6.1	5.8	6.3
Mexico	7.8	7.2	6.6	7.5	..
Netherlands	7.3	6.4	5.7	6.4	5.4
New Zealand	8.0	7.4	7.6	6.9	6.2
Norway	6.5	5.4	4.9	5.2	4.8
Poland	9.7	8.6	7.2	6.7	..
Spain	7.6	6.8	5.0	5.6	5.0
Sweden	5.4	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.9
Switzerland	5.5	5.6	6.0	6.9	6.1
United Kingdom	7.7	7.5	6.9	6.5	..
United States	9.8	10.4	10.1	9.8	9.1
U.S.S.R. [†]	10.7	10.3	9.8	8.9	..

Sources: *United Nations, Demographic Year Books 1982, 1986 and 1993; Statistics Canada, Catalogue 91-209E*

[†] *Russian Federation for 1990.*

Long-term provincial trends

In most provinces, there were fewer marriages in 1994 than in 1974. The two exceptions were Alberta and British Columbia, but even there, the 1994 figures were down from highs in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Trends in crude marriage rates are even more consistent. In every province, the 1994 rate was below the 1974 rate. The decline was particularly pronounced in Quebec, where a high proportion of couples are in common-law unions. In that province, the crude marriage rate dropped from 8.2 to 3.4 per 1,000 population between 1974 and 1994, so that it is now the lowest in the country (see *The Quebec difference*). Because of its large population, Quebec's extremely low marriage rate markedly affects the national figure. In fact, 1994 rates in all the other provinces were above the national level. For instance, in Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia, the rates were more than 6 marriages per 1,000 population.

Higher remarriage rate among divorced

Crude marriage rates, calculated on the basis of the total population, tell only part of the story, since not everyone is eligible to get married. People who are already married and children are not part of the "marriage pool." Rates that take account of age and marital status provide a better indication of marriage trends.

Throughout the 1974-1994 period, the highest marriage rates were among those who had been divorced. Next most likely to marry were single people, and finally, those who were widowed. Nonetheless, marriage rates for people in each of the three groups dropped sharply over the two decades (Table 2).

By 1994, the marriage rate for divorced people was 41.9 marriages per 1,000, a steep decline from 151.6 in 1974. The marriage rate among single people also fell: from 71.4 to 32.4 per 1,000. Among the people least likely to marry—widows and widowers—the rate declined from 14.2 to 6.2 marriages per 1,000.

Marriage rates among single and widowed people dropped almost steadily over the two decades. However, there was a slight upturn in the late 1980s, after changes to the Divorce Act in 1985. Among the divorced population, the upturn in marriage rates was sharper, but equally brief.

A longer-term effect of the liberalization of divorce is evident in the distribution of marriages by the marital status of the bride and groom. By 1994, at least one partner in 24% of all marriages was remarrying, compared with 14% in 1974. This shift is entirely attributable to divorced people, rather than widows and widowers. In 1994, 20% of brides and 21% of grooms

The Quebec difference

The sharp drop in marriages is partly attributable to a rise in common-law unions.

Nowhere are common-law relationships more prevalent than in the province of Quebec. By 1991, 19% of Quebec couples were in common-law unions, up from 8% in 1981. In the rest of Canada, the corresponding figure also rose, but was much lower: 5% in 1991, compared with 3% in 1981.⁷

The large number of Quebec couples opting for a common-law arrangement widened differences that already existed between the marriage and divorce patterns of residents of Quebec and the rest of Canada. For example, based on prevailing age-specific marriage rates, the percentage of Quebec men who would never marry increased from 29% in 1981 to 50% in 1991; the increase for women was from 26% to 44%. The percentages in the rest of Canada remained well below Quebec levels, rising from 17% to 24% for men and from 14% to 18% for women.

At the same time, based on prevailing age-specific divorce rates, the percentage of marriages that would end in divorce increased from 30% to 35% in Quebec, and from 29% to 30% in the rest of Canada. A more dramatic change was the drop in the percentage of divorced people who would eventually remarry. In Quebec, this figure fell from 62% to 46% between 1981 and 1991 for men, and from 48% to 34% for women. In the rest of Canada, the percentages of divorced people who could be expected to remarry also dropped from 78% to 69% for men, and from 69% to 58% for women.

Similarly, in Quebec, the percentage of widowers and widows who would eventually remarry fell from 13% to 7% and from 5% to 2%, respectively. The declines in the rest of Canada were not as sharp, with the percentages dropping from 17% to 13% for widowers, and from 6% to 4% for widows.

Because of these trends, the average number of years residents of Quebec and of the rest of Canada can expect to spend in each marital status differ substantially. By 1991, at age 15, Quebec men could expect to live, on average, 11 more years single and 14 fewer years married than men in the rest of Canada. Women in Quebec could expect to live 15 more years single and 14

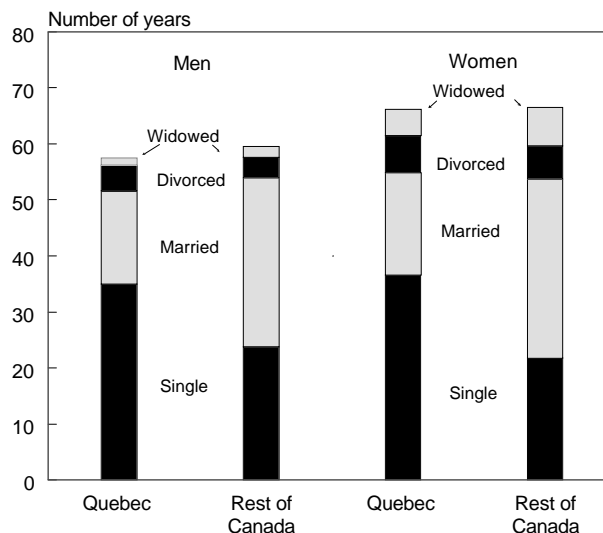
fewer years married than women in the rest of Canada. Differences in years widowed and divorced were less pronounced.

The discrepancy in years married is somewhat offset by years in common-law unions. By 1991, men in Québec could expect to spend 7.9 years in a common-law union, compared with 3.3 years for men in the rest of Canada. The corresponding figures for women were 7.7 and 3.1 years.

Thus, Quebec's marital relationships increasingly diverge from those of other Canadians.

An in-depth analysis of marriage in Quebec and the rest of Canada is presented in *The decline of marriage in Canada, 1981 to 1991* (Catalogue 84-536).

Average number of years expected to be spent in each marital status at age 15, by sex, Quebec and rest of Canada, 1991



Source: Catalogue 84-536

Table 2

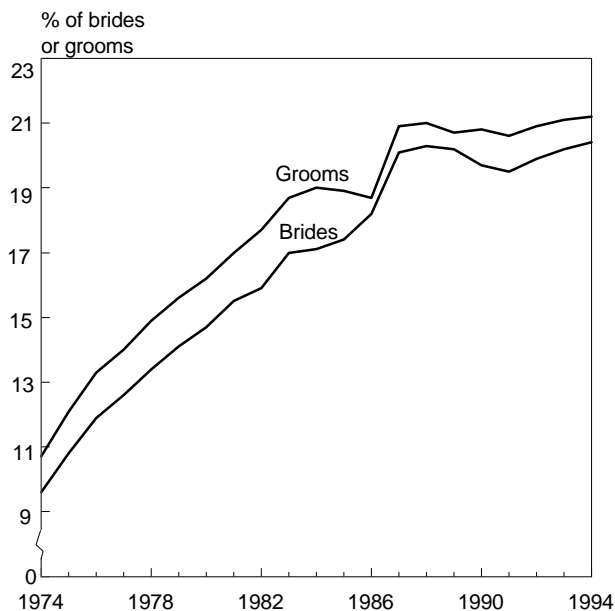
Marriage rates, by prior marital status, Canada, 1974-1994

	Marital status prior to marriage		
	Single	Divorced	Widowed
	Marriages per 1,000 aged 15+		
1974	71.4	151.6	14.2
1975	68.4	148.0	13.5
1976	62.6	135.5	12.5
1977	60.9	123.8	12.1
1978	58.4	114.6	11.3
1979	57.6	106.0	10.8
1980	57.0	97.8	10.5
1981	50.8	93.1	9.9
1982	49.2	87.8	9.0
1983	47.0	84.8	8.5
1984	46.3	80.3	9.2
1985	45.4	74.6	8.3
1986	42.4	67.5	7.8
1987	42.1	72.7	8.9
1988	42.9	70.5	8.2
1989	42.8	66.1	8.3
1990	41.5	60.4	7.5
1991	37.6	51.6	6.9
1992	34.9	47.1	6.6
1993	32.9	43.7	6.2
1994	32.4	41.9	6.2

Source: Catalogue 84-212

Chart 2

Previously divorced people as percent of brides and grooms, Canada, 1974-1994



Source: Catalogue 84-212

had previously been divorced, up from 10% and 11%, respectively, in 1974 (Chart 2). The proportion of grooms who were widowers remained around 3%, while the proportion of brides who were widows fell slightly from 4% to 3%.

Delaying marriage

Not only are fewer people marrying, but those who do so are waiting longer to take their vows. By 1994, the average age of brides was 30.1 years, and of grooms, 32.6 years; in 1974, the corresponding ages had been 24.9 and 27.4.

Understandably, the age of brides and grooms varies with their prior marital status. But regardless of prior marital status, brides and grooms were older in 1994 than in 1974. Those who married for the first time were the youngest. In 1994, the average ages of first-time brides and grooms were 26.9 and 28.8, up from 22.5 and 24.8 in 1974. For divorced people remarrying in 1994, the average ages were 38.6 for brides and 42.1 for grooms, compared with 34.9 and 38.4 two decades earlier. The average ages of widows and widowers who remarried in 1994 were 55.2 and 61.4; in 1974, the averages had been 52.8 and 58.5.

Whom do they marry?

People tend to marry someone of the same marital status. This is especially true of those marrying for the first time. In 1994, almost 90% of brides and grooms who had never been married were marrying people who also had never married. Slightly over half of divorced brides and grooms married people who had been divorced, although around 40% of them married single people. Widows and widowers who remarried also tended to marry each other (44%), but almost as many (39% of men and 37% of women) married people who had been divorced.

For both sexes, the twenties are the peak years for getting married. However, marriage rates per 1,000 unmarried persons differ substantially for men and women at various ages (Chart 3). In 1994, marriage rates were highest at ages 25 to 29, but there was a

wide gap: 81.4 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women versus 66.1 for men. In fact, until age 35, women's marriage rates exceed men's. Thereafter, men are more likely than women to marry, and the difference widens with advancing age. For example, among people in their late fifties, the marriage rate was 21.0 per 1,000 unmarried men, compared with 8.7 for women.

Grooms are likely to be older than their brides, particularly at older ages.¹³ In 1994, 14% of grooms aged 40 to 44 married women at least 10 years younger than themselves. The corresponding figure for grooms aged 50 to 54 was 25%, and for those aged 60 to 64, 33%. By contrast, only about 4% of brides in these age ranges married men at least 10 years younger than themselves.

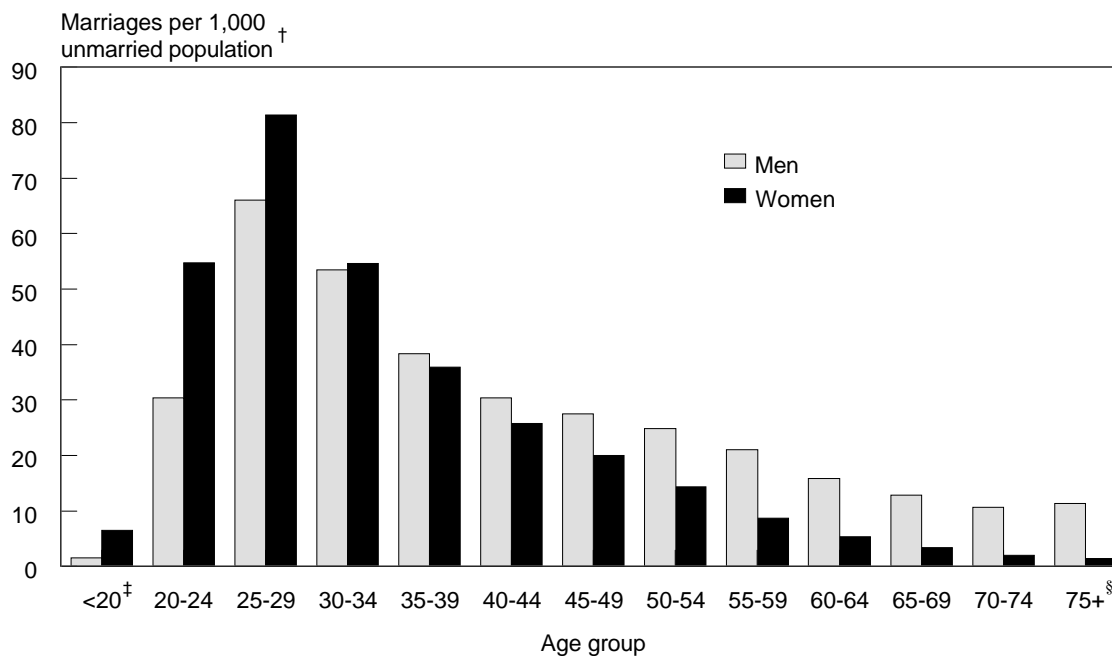
When do they marry?

Picking a date for a wedding is a blend of convenience, superstition, and romance.

Canadians tend to get married in the summer. July is the peak month for marriages, followed by August, and then September (Chart 4). Saturday is the day most couples choose, especially if it is part of a long weekend. It follows, then, that long weekends during the summer are popular times for weddings. The weekends adjoining Canada Day in July, the Civic Holiday at the beginning of August, and Labour Day in early September bring an upturn in marriages.

Chart 3

Marriage rates, by age and sex, Canada, 1994



Source: Catalogue 84-212

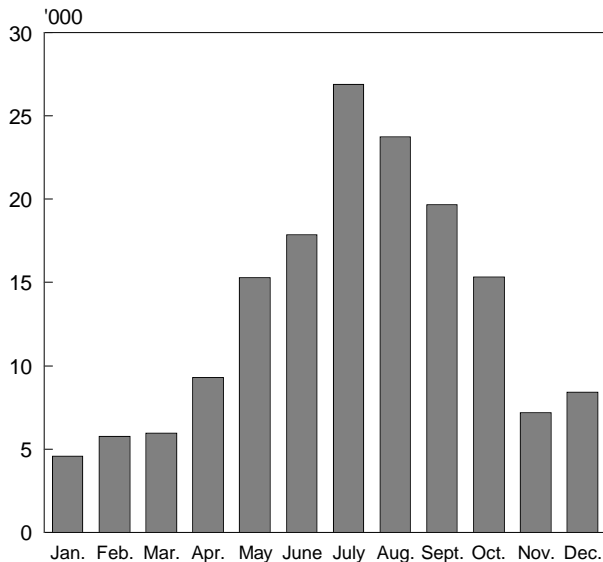
[†] The unmarried population is comprised of single, widowed, and divorced people.

[‡] Denominator includes only people aged 15 to 19.

[§] Denominator includes only people aged 75 to 79.

Chart 4

Marriages by month, Canada, 1994



Source: Catalogue 84-212

In 1994, 70% of marriages took place on Saturdays, and 41% were celebrated during the 11 weeks from June 18 to September 3. However, the top day for weddings that year, when 5,091 couples exchanged vows, was Saturday August 20, which was not part of a long weekend. This high number may reflect a spillover from the previous Saturday, which had seen an abnormally low number of marriages (3,497) for a Saturday in August, possibly because it fell on the 13th day of the month.

As well as the summer months, in 1994, relatively large numbers of couples married on the Saturdays of Victoria Day in May (3,558) and Thanksgiving in October (3,347), and to a lesser extent, on the Saturday nearest Remembrance Day in November (1,325) and on December 17 and 31 (1,146 and 1,013, respectively). And there was one day in 1994 with a higher number of marriages than any other Tuesday that year: 527 on February 14.

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Appendix

Number of marriages and crude marriage rates, Canada, provinces and territories, 1974-1994

	Canada	Nfld.	P.E.I.	N.S.	N.B.	Que.†	Ont.	Man.	Sask.	Alta.	B.C.	Yukon	N.W.T.
Number of marriages													
1974	198,824	4,276	990	7,112	6,108	51,532	72,716	9,231	7,988	16,691	21,734	190	256
1975	197,585	4,313	936	7,059	5,945	50,377	72,209	8,915	8,066	17,520	21,824	201	220
1976	193,343	4,171	971	6,690	5,754	50,790	69,364	8,297	7,563	17,752	21,536	192	263
1977	187,344	3,895	892	6,304	5,275	48,171	67,730	8,238	7,237	17,976	21,156	204	266
1978	185,523	3,841	939	6,560	5,310	45,936	67,491	8,232	7,139	18,277	21,388	194	216
1979	187,811	3,737	893	6,920	5,355	46,341	67,980	7,769	7,272	18,999	22,087	181	277
1980	191,069	3,783	939	6,791	5,321	44,848	68,840	7,869	7,561	20,818	23,830	200	269
1981	190,082	3,758	849	6,632	5,108	41,005	70,281	8,123	7,329	21,781	24,699	235	282
1982	188,360	3,764	855	6,486	4,923	38,354	71,595	8,264	7,491	22,312	23,831	225	260
1983	184,675	3,778	937	6,505	5,260	36,144	70,893	8,261	7,504	21,172	23,692	243	286
1984	185,597	3,567	1,057	6,798	5,294	37,433	71,922	8,393	7,213	20,052	23,397	212	259
1985	184,096	3,220	956	6,807	5,312	37,026	72,891	8,296	7,132	19,750	22,292	185	229
1986	175,518	3,421	970	6,445	4,962	33,083	70,839	7,816	6,820	18,896	21,826	183	257
1987	182,151	3,481	924	6,697	4,924	32,616	76,201	7,994	6,853	18,640	23,395	189	237
1988	187,728	3,686	965	6,894	5,292	33,519	78,533	7,908	6,767	19,272	24,461	209	222
1989	190,640	3,905	1,019	6,828	5,254	33,325	80,377	7,800	6,637	19,888	25,170	214	223
1990	187,737	3,791	996	6,386	5,044	32,060	80,097	7,666	6,229	19,806	25,216	218	228
1991	172,251	3,480	876	5,845	4,521	28,922	72,938	7,032	5,923	18,612	23,691	196	215
1992	164,573	3,254	850	5,623	4,313	25,841	70,079	6,899	5,664	17,871	23,749	221	209
1993	159,316	3,163	885	5,403	4,177	25,021	66,575	6,752	5,638	17,860	23,446	180	216
1994	159,959	3,318	850	5,374	4,219	24,985	66,694	6,585	5,689	18,096	23,739	169	241
Marriages per 1,000 population													
1974	8.7	7.8	8.5	8.7	9.2	8.2	8.8	9.0	8.8	9.5	8.9	9.0	6.2
1975	8.5	7.7	7.9	8.5	8.8	7.9	8.7	8.7	8.8	9.7	8.7	9.1	5.1
1976	8.2	7.4	8.2	8.0	8.3	7.9	8.2	8.0	8.1	9.5	8.5	8.5	5.9
1977	7.9	6.9	7.4	7.5	7.6	7.5	7.9	7.9	7.6	9.2	8.2	8.9	5.9
1978	7.7	6.8	7.7	7.8	7.6	7.1	7.8	7.9	7.5	9.0	8.1	8.1	4.7
1979	7.7	6.5	7.2	8.1	7.6	7.1	7.8	7.5	7.6	9.0	8.3	7.5	6.0
1980	7.8	6.6	7.6	7.9	7.5	6.9	7.8	7.6	7.8	9.5	8.6	8.2	5.8
1981	7.6	6.5	6.8	7.7	7.2	6.2	8.0	7.8	7.5	9.5	8.7	9.8	5.9
1982	7.5	6.5	6.9	7.5	6.9	5.8	8.0	7.9	7.6	9.4	8.3	9.1	5.2
1983	7.3	6.5	7.4	7.5	7.3	5.5	7.8	7.8	7.5	8.8	8.1	10.2	5.6
1984	7.2	6.1	8.3	7.7	7.3	5.6	7.8	7.8	7.1	8.4	7.9	8.8	4.9
1985	7.1	5.5	7.5	7.7	7.3	5.5	7.8	7.6	6.9	8.2	7.5	7.5	4.2
1986	6.7	5.9	7.5	7.2	6.8	4.9	7.5	7.1	6.6	7.7	7.2	7.4	4.6
1987	6.9	6.0	7.2	7.5	6.7	4.8	7.9	7.3	6.6	7.6	7.6	7.3	4.3
1988	7.0	6.4	7.4	7.7	7.2	4.9	7.9	7.2	6.6	7.8	7.8	7.8	3.9
1989	7.0	6.8	7.8	7.5	7.1	4.8	7.9	7.1	6.5	7.9	7.8	7.8	3.9
1990	6.8	6.5	7.6	7.0	6.8	4.6	7.7	6.9	6.2	7.7	7.6	7.8	3.8
1991	6.1	6.0	6.7	6.4	6.0	4.1	7.0	6.3	5.9	7.2	7.0	6.7	3.5
1992	5.8	5.6	6.5	6.1	5.7	3.6	6.6	6.2	5.6	6.8	6.8	7.3	3.3
1993	5.5	5.4	6.6	5.8	5.5	3.5	6.2	6.0	5.6	6.6	6.6	5.9	3.4
1994	5.5	5.7	6.3	5.8	5.6	3.4	6.1	5.8	5.6	6.7	6.5	5.7	3.7

Source: Catalogue 84-212

† Figures adjusted for undercount in the province of Quebec in 1976.