

Divorce in the 1990s

Jane F. Gentleman and Evelyn Park

Abstract

Objectives

This article presents divorce statistics from 1970 through 1995 and focuses on divorce rates in the 1990s.

Data sources

The divorce data are from microdata provided annually to Statistics Canada by the Central Divorce Registry of the Department of Justice Canada. Data from Statistics Canada's 1990 General Social Survey were used to obtain the duration of marriages.

Analytical techniques

The divorce rates presented here are more precise than previously published rates because the denominators of the rates exclude people in common-law unions. Divorce statistics were derived for each sex separately.

Main results

Divorce rates have not changed dramatically in the 1990s and are only slightly higher than in the early 1980s. Divorce rates peak among those who have been married for five years and then decrease as duration of marriage lengthens.

Key words

divorce rates, duration of marriage, common-law

Authors

Jane F. Gentleman (613-951-8553) and Evelyn Park (613-951-5821) are with the Health Statistics Division at Statistics Canada, Ottawa K1A 0T6.

As divorce became more commonplace in the 1970s and 1980s, so did the impression that it was not simply increasing, but was soaring upward. A steady rise in the divorce rate during the 1970s was followed by striking fluctuations in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, the number of common-law unions was increasing. Between 1981 and 1995, the number of couples living in common-law arrangements tripled from about 300,000 to over one million. Common-law unions are not legal contracts and are ended without legal proceedings. Consequently, unlike marriages, the dissolution of common-law relationships is not recorded in official registries.

Despite the increase in common-law relationships, married couples are far more numerous. In 1995, there were over 6.3 million married couples in Canada. Thus, divorce data continue to be relevant to the analysis of family dissolution.

This article examines divorce patterns from 1970 to 1995, focusing on the 1990s. It is based on information from the Central Divorce Registry, provided to Statistics Canada by the Department of Justice Canada (see *Methods*). Divorce data indicate that rates have been relatively unchanged in the 1990s and are not very much higher than in the early 1980s.

Divorces peak in 1987

Between 1971 and 1982, the annual number of divorces more than doubled from 29,684 to 70,430 (Table 1). Divorce rates also more than doubled from 135 to 280 per 100,000 population during the same period. From 1982 to 1985, the numbers and rates of divorce declined as some couples postponed divorcing because of anticipated legislation that would liberalize divorce law.

Methods

Data sources

The divorce data in this article are taken from microdata provided annually to Statistics Canada by the Central Divorce Registry of the Department of Justice Canada. The data base includes information specific to each divorcing couple (with 100% coverage), such as dates of birth, marriage, and divorce, marital status immediately before the marriage, etc. These data are maintained and published annually by Statistics Canada.¹⁻³ For additional analyses of national divorce data, see references 4-11.

In recognition of the growing acceptance and prevalence of common-law unions, the 1991 and 1996 Censuses asked two questions to ascertain both the legal marital status and living arrangements of couples. The new questions made it possible to more accurately identify the population at risk of divorce, which comprises only legally married couples. Accordingly, this analysis used population counts of legally married men and women for 1981 through 1995 (based on results from the new questions, intercensal estimates, estimates projected back and estimates based on other census information). As a result, the rates presented here are higher than previously published figures that included individuals in common-law relationships in the denominators. For more information on common-law unions in Canada, see reference 12.

Data from Statistics Canada's 1990 General Social Survey were used to obtain the duration of marriages. That survey had 13,495 respondents aged 15 and older.¹³

Analytical techniques

Divorce statistics were derived for each sex separately to avoid double counting couples who are married but not living together. When the statistics are age-specific, the results for men and women

may differ appreciably because husbands are not generally the same age as their wives. When the statistics are not age-specific, counts of couples should be exactly the same for men and women. However, counts of marriages based on survey data may show small differences between men and women because, for example, some spouses reside outside the country, or because the amount of adjustment for census net undercoverage is different for men and women. Non-age-specific survey results used in this analysis are based on the husband's response.

The analysis also focuses on three 3-year time periods: 1970-72, 1980-82, and 1990-92. Divorce rates for 1980-82 and 1990-92 were calculated using 1981 and 1991 counts, respectively, of the legally married population; divorce rates for 1970-72 used 1971 counts of the legally married and common-law populations combined. Because common-law unions were relatively rare in 1971, it is assumed in this analysis that the 1971 counts are close to counts of the legally married population, and consequently the rates for the three time periods are comparable.

These three periods were chosen for several reasons. Each interval is centred around a census year. Because they exclude the late 1980s when there were notable fluctuations in the divorce rate, they present a clearer view of the overall trend. And using a three-year period reduced the effect of minor fluctuations in the divorce rate from one year to another.

A small number of divorce records indicating that either spouse was older than 87 were omitted from the analysis because the age information was considered to be unreliable. Only for the last few years has Statistics Canada compiled and published annual divorce data for the age group 65 and over; previously, the oldest age group examined was 55 and over.

Under the Divorce Act of 1985, marriage breakdown became the only grounds for divorce, and the evidence required to support this claim was reduced. During the two years after introduction of the Act, numbers and rates of divorces rose dramatically as divorce became easier to obtain and the “backlog” of couples intending to divorce did so under the new law. In the peak year of 1987, 96,200 divorces were granted, a rate of 1,586 divorces per 100,000 legally married couples. Interestingly, from 1986 to 1989, the annual number

of marriages also rose briefly, from 175,518 to 190,640, as divorce freed more people to remarry (Chart 1).

Divorces level off in 1990s

The rise in divorces did not continue. Rates have not changed dramatically in the 1990s, and are only slightly higher than in the early 1980s.

After the spike in 1987, numbers and rates declined through 1991. Between 1991 and 1995, the annual number of divorces levelled off, fluctuating between 77,000 and 79,000. The trend in the divorce rate was similar. At 1,222 divorces per 100,000 legally married couples, the 1995 rate was not much higher than in 1982 (1,215) (Table 1).

Table 1
Divorce rates, Canada, 1971 to 1995

Year	Divorces	Population	Legally married couples†	Divorce rate	
				Per 100,000 population	Per 100,000 legally married couples†
1971	29,684	22,026,421	..	134.8	..
1972	32,389	22,284,545	..	145.3	..
1973	36,703	22,559,471	..	162.7	..
1974	45,016	22,874,718	..	196.8	..
1975	50,608	23,209,191	..	218.1	..
1976	54,202	23,517,495	..	230.5	..
1977	55,365	23,796,383	..	232.7	..
1978	57,154	24,036,347	..	237.8	..
1979	59,470	24,276,926	..	245.0	..
1980	62,017	24,593,341	..	252.2	..
1981	67,671	24,899,999	5,732,702	271.8	1,180.4
1982	70,430	25,201,902	5,798,938	279.5	1,214.5
1983	68,565	25,456,302	5,853,458	269.3	1,171.4
1984	65,170	25,701,754	5,906,643	253.6	1,103.3
1985	61,976	25,941,647	5,958,344	238.9	1,040.2
1986	78,304	26,203,819	6,016,055	298.8	1,301.6
1987	96,200	26,549,745	6,066,426	362.3	1,585.8
1988	83,507	26,894,785	6,111,142	310.5	1,366.5
1989	80,998	27,379,348	6,175,988	295.8	1,311.5
1990	78,463	27,790,593	6,214,499	282.3	1,262.6
1991	77,020	28,120,065	6,238,707	273.9	1,234.6
1992	79,034	28,542,213	6,285,215	276.9	1,257.5
1993	78,226	28,946,987	6,319,319	270.2	1,237.9
1994	78,880	29,251,285	6,328,951	269.7	1,246.3
1995	77,636	29,615,325	6,353,665	262.2	1,221.9

Data source: Health Statistics Division

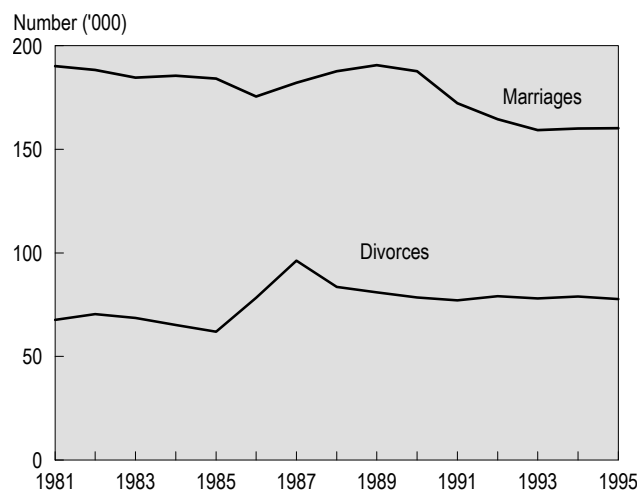
† The number of couples is defined here as the number of men who are legally married.

.. Figures not available

The risk of divorce

About one in one hundred marriages ended in 1995. Thus, for the average couple, the risk of divorcing in a single year is not strikingly high. However, the risk of ever obtaining a divorce is much greater. If 1991 divorce rates prevail, an estimated 31% of couples who married in 1991 will divorce sometime in the future.⁴

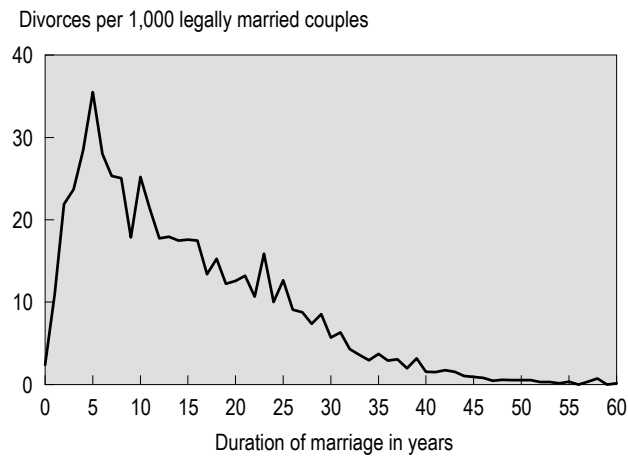
Chart 1
Divorces and marriages, Canada, 1981 to 1995



Data source: Health Statistics Division

In contrast to the annual divorce rate, estimating the chance of a married couple ever divorcing requires complex calculations that take into consideration that a marriage can end other than in divorce, that is, with one spouse dying. Statistics Canada periodically publishes these rates with multi-state marital status life tables derived from marriage, divorce and mortality data.^{4,11}

Chart 2
Divorce rate, by duration of marriage, Canada, 1990



Data sources: Health Statistics Division and 1990 General Social Survey

A five year itch?

Understandably, the risk of divorce is not uniform for all marriages. Duration of the relationship is one of many factors associated with divorce rates. The chance of divorce increases rapidly in the early years of a marriage to peak at five years and then decrease (Chart 2). In 1990, about 4 out of 100 couples who had just had their fifth wedding anniversary obtained a divorce.

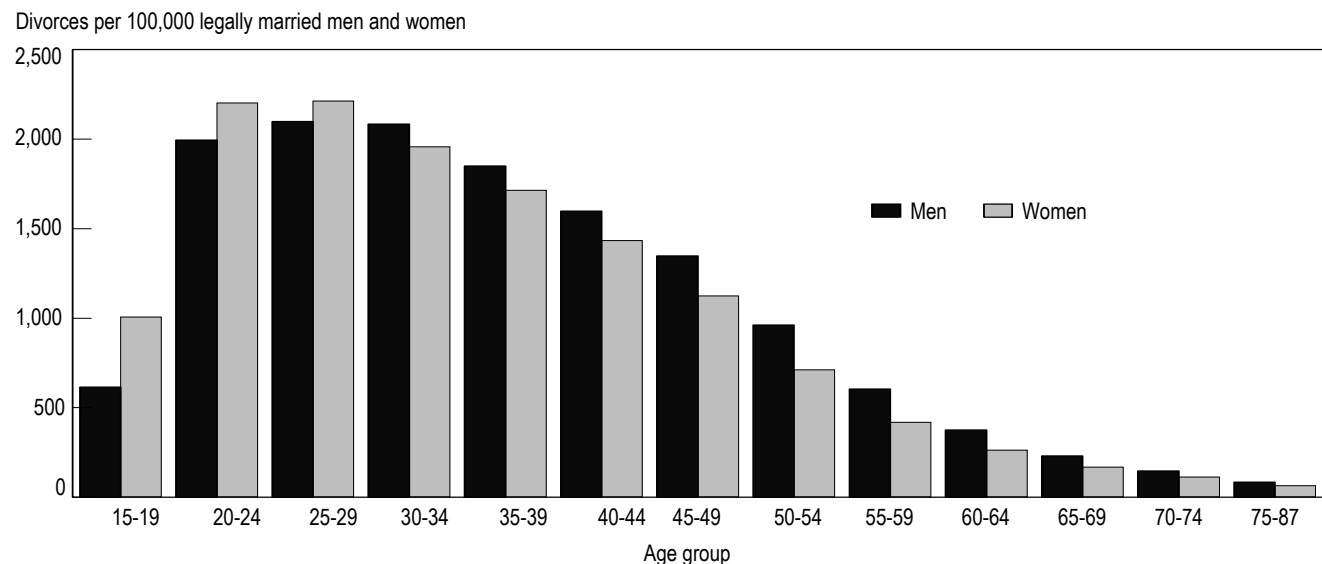
Divorce rates highest among young adults

People in their late twenties are the most susceptible to divorce. In 1990-92, the divorce rate among 25-29-year-old men was 2,099 per 100,000 legally married men. For 25-29-year-old women, the rate was 2,213.

Before age 30, divorce rates are higher for women than for men. At older ages, the situation is reversed (Chart 3). These differences reflect the fact that brides are, on average, younger than grooms.

Though the rates have increased, the overall patterns in divorce rates by age group and sex have prevailed since the early 1970s (Table 2).

Chart 3
Annual divorce rate, by age group, Canada, 1990-92



Data source: Health Statistics Division

Second and subsequent marriages

Not surprisingly, the oldest divorcing men and women have had the longest marriages. For example, for men aged 65-87, the average duration of marriages that ended in divorce in 1990-92 was 26.6 years. But these averages are misleading because the distribution of the length of marriages ending in divorce is bimodal (Chart 4). That is, men

in the oldest age group tend to divorce after having been married for either a short time (2 years), or for a long time (42 years).

When the divorce counts are disaggregated according to whether men aged 65-87 were single or divorced immediately before entering the marriage in consideration that ended in divorce, it is clear that the upper peak in marriage durations corresponds to first marriages that lasted a relatively long time, and the lower peak corresponds to subsequent marriages that lasted a relatively short time. For men aged 65-87, the average duration of first marriages ending in divorce in 1990-92 was 37.8 years, and the peak duration was 42 years. The average duration of their second and subsequent marriages ending in divorce was 14.1 years, with less well-defined peaks at 11 and fewer years.

The pattern was similar for women in the oldest age group. Divorcing women aged 65-87 in 1990-92 had been married an average of 29.1 years, with most of their divorces occurring after either relatively short or relatively long marriages (around 2 and 44 years, respectively).

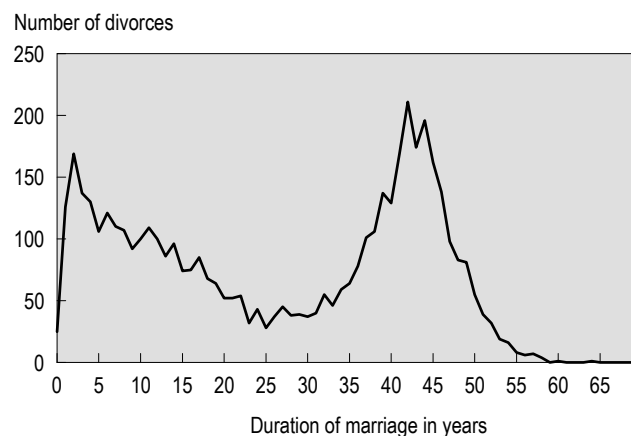
Evidently, the large number of long marriages among the oldest men and women were mostly first marriages, and the large number of short marriages were second or subsequent marriages. This pattern did not hold for younger men or women, who had not lived long enough to have very long marriages.

Table 2
Annual divorce rates, by age group, Canada, three periods

Age group	1970-72		1980-82		1990-92	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Per 100,000 legally married men or women						
15-19	67.0	215.4	307.8	612.7	614.2	1,006.8
20-24	525.1	708.4	1,260.9	1,606.0	1,995.0	2,201.6
25-29	890.8	961.8	2,022.6	2,124.6	2,099.0	2,212.9
30-34	911.0	854.3	1,977.2	1,761.3	2,083.3	1,957.4
35-39	775.8	717.1	1,639.5	1,455.5	1,849.8	1,713.5
40-44	676.8	630.9	1,298.6	1,123.2	1,597.6	1,434.0
45-49	580.2	515.7	1,002.2	829.5	1,347.7	1,124.4
50-54	490.0	401.3	754.9	561.9	961.4	710.8
55-59	367.8	276.5	483.7	365.6	603.7	417.2
60-64	273.7	174.0	321.3	229.0	374.5	262.6
65-69	187.0	109.4	207.0	159.9	231.3	167.8
70-74	105.9	59.7	135.1	92.9	146.0	112.7
75-87	56.8	33.6	77.1	46.6	84.7	64.5

Data source: Health Statistics Division

Chart 4
Number of divorces, by duration of marriage, men aged 65-87, Canada, 1990-92



Data source: Health Statistics Division

Concluding remarks

Divorce rates have been relatively unchanged in the 1990s, and are not much higher than in the early 1980s. Although the risk of divorce has increased dramatically since 1970, about two out of three marriages will endure until the death of one of the partners.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank François Nault, Margaret Michalowski, and Demography Division at Statistics Canada for providing custom-tabulated counts of legally married persons.

References

- 1 Statistics Canada. *Divorces, 1992 to Divorces, 1995* (Catalogue 84-213-XPB, annual) Ottawa: Minister of Industry, 1995 to 1997.
- 2 Statistics Canada. *Divorces, 1987 - Divorces, 1990. Health Reports* (Catalogue 82-003S17, annual, Suppl. 17) Ottawa: Minister of Industry.
- 3 Statistics Canada. *Marriages and Divorces 1986* (Catalogue 84-205) Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1986.
- 4 Nault F, Bélanger A. *The Decline in Marriage in Canada, 1981 to 1991* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 84-536-XPB) Ottawa: Minister of Industry, 1996.
- 5 Gentleman JF, Park E. Age differences of married and divorcing couples. *Health Reports* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 82-003) 1994; 6(2): 225-40.
- 6 Dumas J. *Marriage and Conjugal Life in Canada* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 91-534E) Ottawa: Minister of Industry Science and Technology, 1992.
- 7 Lapierre L. Divorces, Canada and the provinces, 1990. *Health Reports* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 82-003) 1991; 3(4): 380-3.
- 8 Millar W. Divorces, Canada and the provinces, 1989. *Health Reports* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 82-003) 1991; 3(1): 83-6.
- 9 Adams O. Divorces in Canada, 1988. *Health Reports* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 82-003) 1990; 2(1): 57-66.
- 10 McKie DC, Prentice B, Reed P. *Divorce: Law and the Family in Canada* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 89-502) Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1989.
- 11 Adams OB, Nagnur DN. *Marriage, Divorce and Mortality: A Life Table Analysis for Canada and Regions* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 84-536) Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1988.
- 12 Dumas J, Bélanger A, Smith G. *Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada, 1996* (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 91-209-XPE) Ottawa: Minister of Industry, 1997.
- 13 Statistics Canada. *Public Use Micro Data File, Documentation and User Guide, 1995 General Social Survey, Cycle 10: Family* (Catalogue 12M0010GPE) Ottawa: Minister of Industry, 1997.